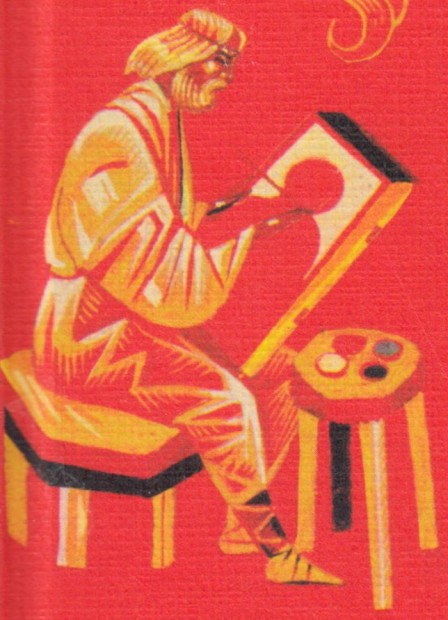
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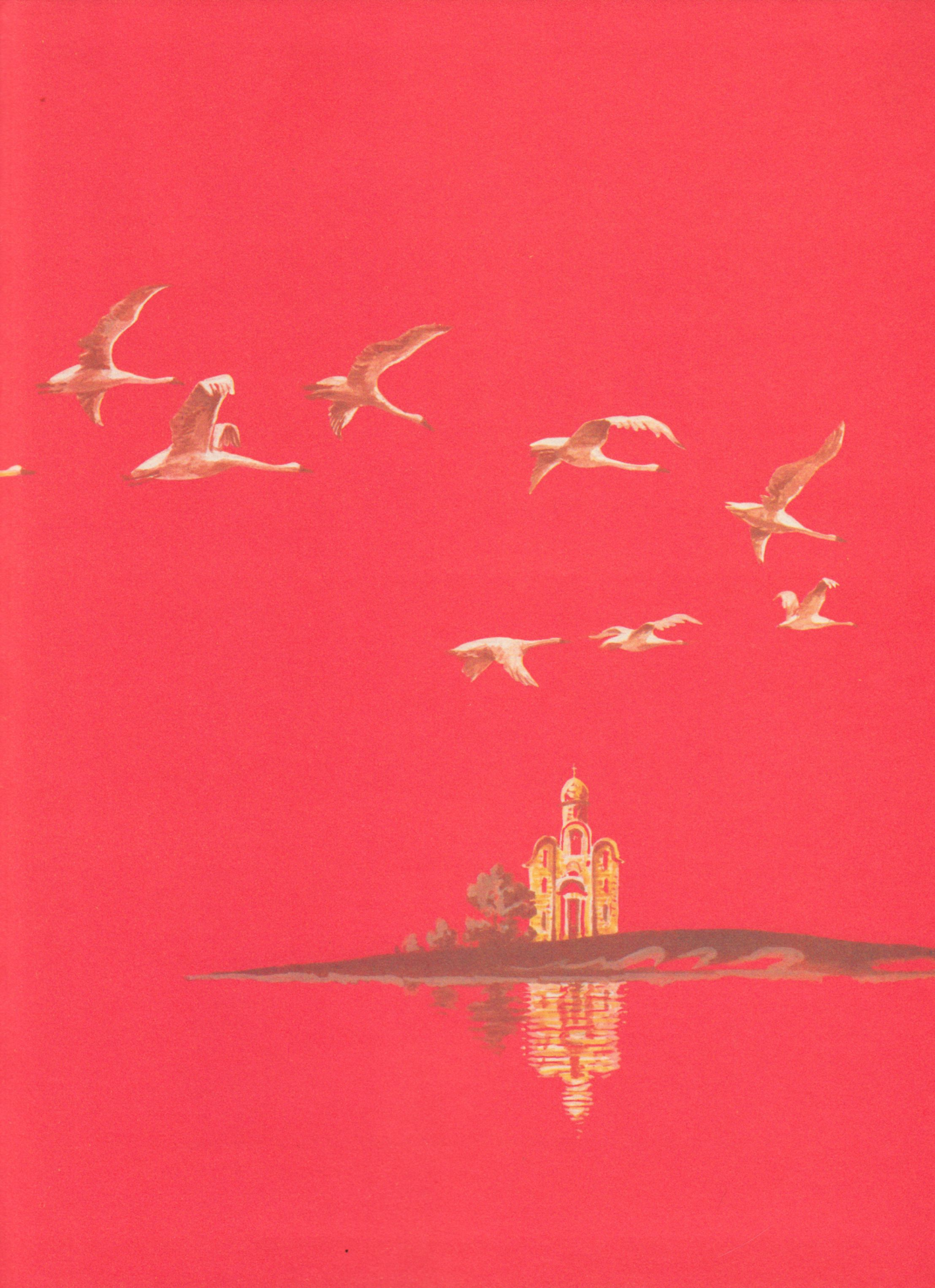
THE TALE OF MASTER EGOR





RADUGA
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GEORGI YUDIN

THE TALE OF MASTER EGOR

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY K. M. COOK-HORUJY
ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR

RADUGA PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

Translation from the Russian

Г. Юдин
ПТИЦА СИРИН И ВСАДНИК НА БЕЛОМ КОНЕ
На английском языке

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CHAPTER ONE

Long, long ago, when Moscow became the capital of Old Russia, after long wars and bitter princely strife the throne went to Tsar Ivan, called Ivan the Terrible by the people because of his cruelty. Yet our tale is not of him, but of a simple Russian peasant called Master Egor.

Some distance from Moscow, on the bank of the River Merrilee, stood the fair little village of Homestead. It

was here that Egor, or Egorka as they called him when he was young, was born.

He was a strange lad. Out running around with the village boys playing leap-frog or "he", he would suddenly stand stock-still in the middle of the street.

"Why have you stopped, Egorka?"

"Just look at the sunset," he said. "It looks as if the sky is on fire. And the frogs are singing..."

"Listen to him! Haven't you ever heard frogs before? Come on, either you play or you'll get a ducking in the pond!"

Or he would lie down in the tall grass and gaze for hours at the flowers.

"Aren't you feeling well, Egorka?" asked his mother. "You've been lying there all morning without stirring."

"I'm listening to the sap running up the stalks, Mother."

"Surely you can't hear that?" his mother asked tenderly. Then she gave him a pensive look and walked away quietly.

Another favourite pastime of Egorka's was to wake the birds early in the morning when the stars were fading and you could hear apples drop onto the grass in the garden. He went outside and played quietly on his pipe–tra-la-la. And back came the answer from the first little bird–cheep, cheep! Followed by a second, then a third, until the whole garden came to life and burst into song!

"You're a chirpy young sparrow," Grandma Akulina called down hoarsely from the stove-bench. "Don't you think the birds will wake up without you?"

But most of all Egorka liked holidays, when they sang stirring songs, danced gay reels and rode on troikas with bells on the shaft-bows. Each holiday was like a fairy

tale, full of magic and mystery. Nothing on earth could drag him away from the festivities.

Take St George's Day, when the cattle went out to graze for the first time after the cold winter. St George the Warrior or George the Protector was known to one and all in Old Russia. Common folk called him Egor. He helped the peasants, interceding for them if need be and protecting the cattle. So one of the holidays was named after him.

On the evening before St George's Day Grandma Akulina, like all the other women in the village, baked little buns called "cones" and put a cow hair in each of them.

Early next morning Egorka and his grandmother would drive the cow and the horse out of the byre with branches of pussy willow, instead of a bare switch. On the ground before the byre Father placed an iron padlock. The cow and horse had to step over the lock without touching it, then the spell would lock the jaws of a predatory wolf or bear as tight as could be.

Then the whole village went out into the fields. They bowed to the ground thirty times, north, south, east and west, saying: "Our bold St George, save our cattle from fire, water and the savage beast, from the creeping snake and all magic spells. Let the savage beast not hear the cows mooing and the sheep bleating with his keen ears, let him fear the voice of man, and let the evil one be driven away." Then they fed the cattle with the buns, gave them to drink, and urged St George:



Rise early, St George,
Unlock the earth,
And let out the dew
For a warm summer,

A rich harvest,
And the good of all men.

During this night St George did not sleep. With his key of gold he unlocked the dew and let it out onto the earth, then he unlocked the grass and let it grow, and when he blew upon his golden horn, the forests turned green.

Egorka's father tilled the land for a living and rang the church bells for pleasure. And a fine bell-ringer he was too! He could play chimes on five bells to delight the ear. The sound fair gladdened your heart and soul. They tried to tempt him to the great bell-tower in Moscow, offering him plenty of money but he refused. "'Tis my native village that has taught me my skill," he said, "and I shall ring the bells for it."

The happiest time for Egorka was of an evening, when the family gathered at home after a hard day's work.

The dim splinter-torch spluttered quietly, a trail of resinous smoke curled up to the ceiling, and strange shadows danced upon the walls. By the stove Grandma Akulina clattered the iron pans and little by little the house was filled with such a fragrant smell of fresh bread and baked milk that Terenty, the fat tom-cat, forgot all about mice, burst into the room with cobwebs on his whiskers and began mewing anxiously in his deep bass.

Father was weaving bast sandals for the family, Mother sat at her distaff, and Egorka snuggled up to her warm back, gazing entranced out of the dark window as he listened to her fairy tales.

"Over the seven deep seas, beyond the seven high mountains, where earth and sky meet, lies a wondrous

land. So vast that you cannot ride round it on horseback in a whole year. The people there are three-legged giants with four arms. Their eyes and mouth are on their chest. And in that land there are no thieves or robbers or envious folk, for it has riches aplenty. And under that land flows a beautiful river. Once a year the ground above the river opens and anyone who jumps into the river before it closes again, seizes whatever he can in the water and pulls it up with him. The stones are precious gems and the sand is big pearls.

"And in that land are all manner of beasts. Cocks so big that a man can ride them. And the phoenix. At a new moon the phoenix builds her nest on fifteen oak trees, brings down fire from heaven, sets light to her nest and burns with it. Out of the ashes a worm is born that covers itself with feathers and becomes the phoenix once more, living for five hundred years."

The dark log walls of the house slowly fade before Egorka's eyes. He is no longer lying on the stove-bench, but on warm, pink sand in that far-off land. Overhead sway huge red and white flowers, the size of church-bells, and in one sits the Sirin Bird with her shining feathers singing something low and sweet, and she has Mother's face...

Then one day in late summer, when the crops had ripened, Egorka ran home from the pasture at sunrise, white as a sheet and trembling.

"Wake up, Father!" he cried. "There's trouble!"

"What is it, Egorka? Has the horse been stolen?"

"An enemy host is approaching on horseback! They are nearly here!"

Hearing this, his father hurried to the bell-tower just

as he was, in his night-shirt, to sound the alarm. He just had time to tell Egorka and his mother to hide in the cellar with Grandma Akulina.

Off he flew like a bird to the bell-tower, but, mercy upon us! The accursed horsemen were close at hand! Racing along in a black cloud, the earth quaking under their horses' hooves! The bell-ringer pulled the rope of the alarm bell. Make haste, good folk! Calamity threatens!

But it was too late.

The horsemen burst into the village like a whirlwind. Those who had no time to hide were mown down by the infidels or trampled by their wild steeds.

Egorka's mother could bear it no longer. She ran out with Egorka to find her dear husband in the bell-tower. An enemy warrior came galloping up with an evil grin. She barely had time to thrust Egorka into the bushes and stand in front of him, before the fiend smote her with his curved sabre. Only when the terrible horde had raced off into the steppe, whistling and shouting on their whinnying steeds, did Egorka, almost dead with horror, run down the street, past the burning houses to the bell-tower where he found his father dead on the ground.

And thus it was that Egorka became an orphan...

How many orphans there were in Russia at that time, how many good folk perished! 'Tis a wonder the earth did not drown in blood, did not suffocate in black smoke.

All that remained of the village was a few stoves with pipes. Everything else was burnt to ashes. The stoves stood deep in black dust, their long pipes sticking up like thin necks and wailing in the wind at night so eerily that it made your blood run cold.



The few surviving men gathered the logs that remained and built a few houses out of them. The logs were charred from the fire, so the houses built with them rose up like black rooks. And the village changed its name to Black Homestead, and the River Merrilee became the River Sorrow.

The joyless, orphaned days passed slowly for little Egorka. The boy grieved for his parents and was forever silent and pensive, and cried at night on the stove-bench. His grandmother Akulina had made up her mind to die, but now she decided to put it off for a while. How could she leave her grandson alone in such a plight?

That winter was a bitter, lean one. The horsemen had burnt all the ripe crops. There was nothing to eat but bark and pickled cabbage. They could hardly keep going.

Egorka and his grandmother had one consolation. Their little white hen had miraculously survived the raid. She was as thin as could be, but very sprightly, and sometimes even laid an egg. Hungry though she was, Grandma Akulina was keeping these few precious eggs for Easter, the spring festival.

"Come on, lad," she said one day. "Let's paint the eggs and give them to people as Easter presents. That'll cheer them up."

"But what can we use for paint?"

"What people always use. We'll boil up some onion peel or birch bark and paint the eggs brown."

"Giving people brown eggs won't cheer them up very much, Grandma. Perhaps we could paint them all different colours."

"How could we do that?"

"The church elder gave Father some paints for safe-
 keeping, remember? Shall I have a go with them?"

"Why not?" She was as pleased as punch that her grandson had thrown off his grief at last.

Egorka ran down to the cellar where some of their belongings had survived the fire and found the wooden box. The paints were powders tied up in little bags. How could he paint with them?

"I once saw an icon-painter mix these powders with egg yolk, Egorka. Why don't you have a try?"

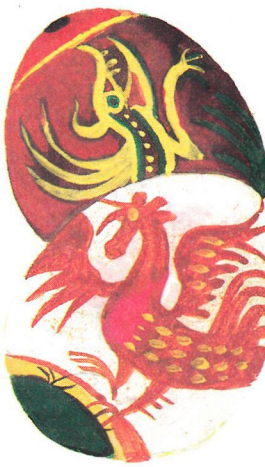
So he did. He mixed the powders with egg yolk, and they turned into rich, glowing paints!

"I'm afraid to begin, Grandma!"

"Don't worry, lad. Eyes may fear, but it's hands does the work!"

He picked up a warm white egg and wondered what to paint on it. Then he remembered the flowers his mother had embroidered on his father's shirt, and carefully drew a flower like them, then another one, with bright green leaves round it. The egg shone like the rainbow. It lay in his palm like a maid in a gay sarafan dress.

He picked up another egg. This time he painted red roosters with splendid tail feathers. Just like real ones! A third egg came to life with magic plants. Then came frisking slender-legged horses and strange-looking creatures.



"Well, I never, Egorka! Where on earth did you learn to paint like that?"

He had drunk in beauty from his father's silvery chimes and his mother's fairy tales, and this beauty had now awoken.

Bitter though the winter was, spring eventually won the day and made winter weep. Her tears formed rivulets and washed the charred earth. The earth sighed

and breathed out warm vapours. Spring came, and with it the spring festival–Easter.

In the old days Grandma Akulina baked Easter cakes with raisins, tall and round like mushrooms, with icing sugar sprinkled on the top like snow. If the cake did not split in the baking, all would be well with the family. But if, God forbid, it did not rise or came out crooked, that was a bad omen.

"Why do you bother to decorate your Easter cakes, Granny?" Old Afanasy, their neighbour, would ask her. "Surely your stomach doesn't care what they look like, does it?"

"Yours may not care, old man, but mine is tired of being in the dark all the time. So let it have a taste of something beautiful."

But this year they had nothing to make an Easter cake from.

In the morning Grandma put on her best headscarf, tied the painted eggs in a small white cloth, combed Egorka's hair and off they went to wish the neighbours a happy Easter.

First they visited Old Afanasy. He lived with his granddaughter Masha, who was also an orphan. On that terrible morning the horsemen had lassoed her mother and dragged her off behind them into the steppe. Her father had run after them with a pitch-fork to get her back. He had stabbed about six of them to death, but what could he do alone against that pack. They had lifted his body up on their spears...

Egorka and his grandmother kissed the old man and Masha three times as is the custom and handed them two painted eggs. The old man cried in delight.

"My goodness, Akulina. You have made them real pretty."

"It wasn't me. That's Egorka's work."

"How could such a young lad paint like that?"

Masha, whom Egorka gave the egg with the red roosters on it, blushed like a beetroot and ran off behind the stove in confusion.

Wherever they went there was laughter and merriment from their presents. Albeit for one day, Egorka had helped people forget their grief.

Spring came, but life was no easier for Egorka and his grandmother. The raiders had taken away their horse and cow into the steppe, so they could not plough and had no milk to drink.

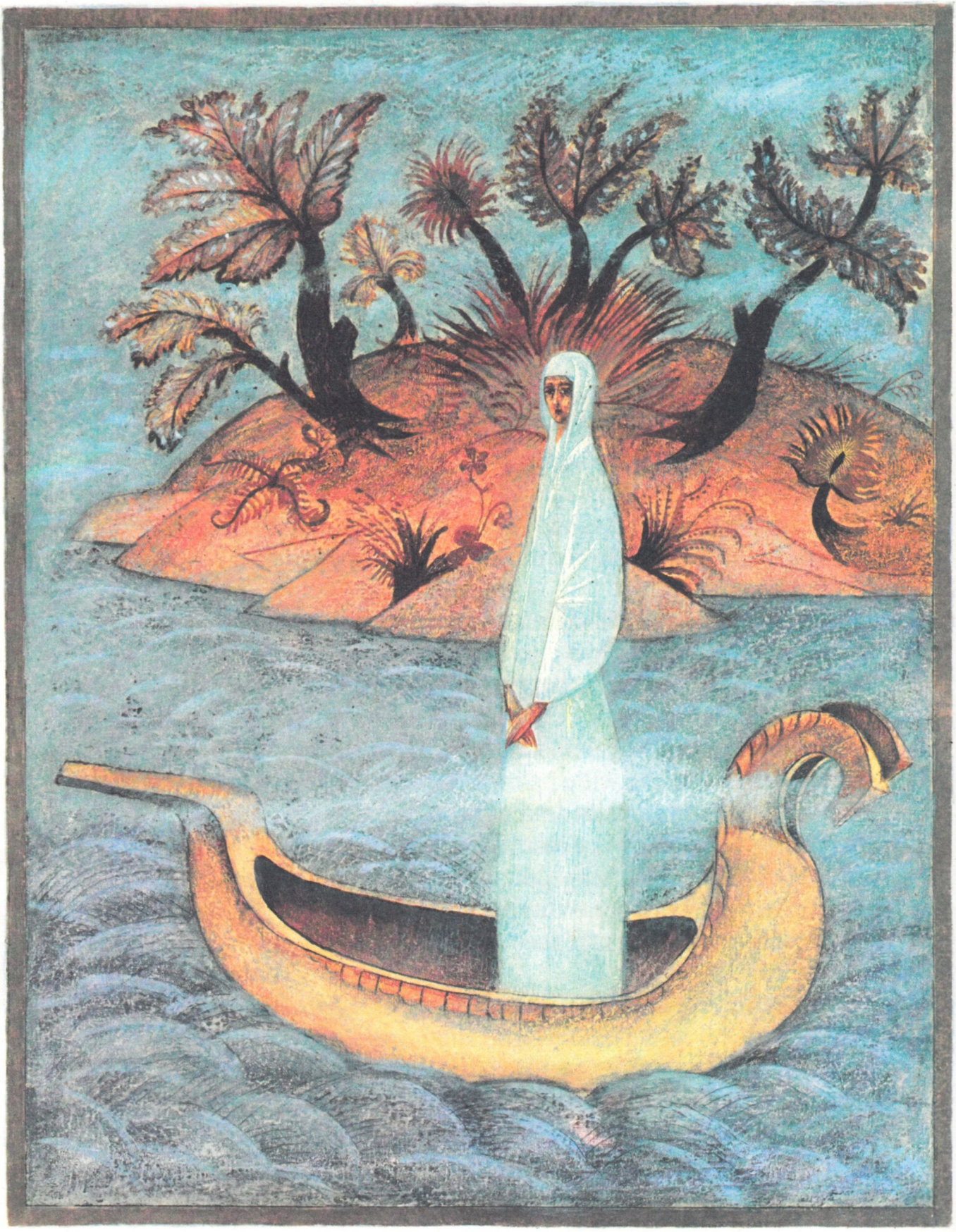
Egorka grew thin as a rake. The villagers decided to let him graze the cattle, so as he didn't waste away completely.

They gathered up all the animals that remained in the village, a mare and her foal, two goats and a cow.

Early in the morning, when the ground was still swathed in feathery mist, Egorka would go round the yards gathering his "herd" and drive it out into the meadows. He wove a whip, as was the custom, and instead of a dog Terenty the tom-cat brougt up the rear. Terenty learnt to hold his tail just like a dog, except that he couldn't bark! He had disappeared after the fire, but then turned up again one day looking like a skeleton, with his fur scorched in places and his whiskers burnt away completely.



One day Egorka and his motley herd came to the bank of the River Sorrow. The cow and the goats began grazing on the young grass, and the mare and foal waded deep into the river and began to drink. The foal snuggled up to its mother like a little child, and she stroked its



back with her wet muzzle to tell it not to be afraid. The white mist drifting over the river hid them from view, occasionally clearing to show a tail or a single horse with two heads, one small, the other large.

Egorka watched them for a long time and fell asleep without realising it. Suddenly he saw a narrow boat sailing silently through the mist. The sides were carved, the prow was adorned with two horse-heads, and in the middle stood a woman in a long white sarafan smiling sadly.

Egorka stared hard, but could not see who it was. The mist kept obscuring her.

Now the boat was drifting past, slowly, like a feather floating in the sky. Suddenly the woman looked at him and asked very quietly:

"Do you remember me, son?"

Egorka cried out and jumped to his feet, but the boat sped off in fright, and it was no longer a boat, but a white swan that beat its wings loudly and vanished into the mist.

Egorka awoke, his face wet with tears. "Mother," he whispered. "Was it really you?"

In memory of this dream, Egorka spent several days carving the magic boat with two horse-heads on the prow from a piece of hard birchwood. When he had carved out the middle, he picked some horsetail and polished the wood with the hard stalks until it shone. In the evening he told Grandma Akulina about his dream and placed the boat on the table. Grandma picked it up carefully and stroked it.

"That's a fine scoop you've made, Egorka. Whenever you drink from it, you will remember your mother."

That night Egorka tossed and turned on the stove-bench for a long time. "Wouldn't it be good to carve

scoops like that for everyone who has lost a loved one," he thought.

And so he did. All summer he carved and polished.

The villagers gathered together to remember their loved ones. They had brewed some beer communally, as was the custom. Then Egorka presented everyone with a scoop. The men grunted approvingly and admired the fine woodwork, while the women pressed the presents to their breasts and sobbed, kissing the embarrassed "master" on his tousled fair head.

Egorka cheered up now that he had found a useful way to spend his time. He learnt to carve spoons. Small ones with twisted handles and gay pictures for children, big ones with carved bears for men, very large ladles with gay patterns for housewives, and richly-carved salt-cellars with a flap lid for the whole family. Salt was revered in Russia and the salt-cellar was always given pride of place on the dinner table.



People in other villages heard about Egorka and came for his spoons, scoops and salt-cellars. He took no payment, just gave them away. Then one day an old man from a neighbouring village got angry with him.

"Why do you refuse my honey?" he said. "You didn't carve those spoons for yourself, did you? And I don't keep bee-hives for myself either. Take the bees. One of them finds a flower, another draws the honey out of it drop by drop, a third makes the comb and a fourth cleans the hive. They all work for one another. And people should do the same."

Each year more and more people came to Egorka. Now they did not only take what he made, but also placed orders with him. One wanted a fine plate for pies,

another a large bucket out of a root, and a third a chest for their daughter's dowry.

Sometimes the house was so packed with customers that it almost burst at the seams.

"Perhaps I should build us a new house, eh, Grandma?" Egorka asked one day.

"Why not? Your father used to build too."

Egorka found some strong pine logs, so the house would be warm. You build a house for winter, not for summer, don't you. He found a nice spot on a little grassy knoll and was about to start work, when Grandma told him to wait.

"Dig four holes," she said, "where the corners will be. We must make sure there are no evil spirits on this spot."

Egorka was surprised, but he did as she said. Then Grandma Akulina put a wooden beaker of water in each of the holes and covered it with a crust of bread. In the morning they took a look. None of the beakers had been knocked over. This meant the spot was free of evil spirits. So now they could build the house there.

Egorka could never have built it on his own, but half the village came to help him. The axes rang, the chips flew merrily and there was a strong smell of resin. The house began to grow before their eyes. Old Afanasy sat on the bench outside his house and teased Grandma Akulina.

"Sing your songs and build your cabin, but keep six boards for a coffin to lie in."

"You keep them if you're planning to die. It's a great deal easier than building a house. Just lie down, yawn and stretch out your legs."

When the last row of logs had been laid and the rafters put in place, Egorka carved a horse's head, as was the custom, and fixed it to the roof-beam.



Then Grandma let Terenty the tom-cat into the new house–to see that no evil spirits had got in. A cat can smell them. If it senses one, it paws the air. Terenty marched in sedately, checked everything thoroughly, sniffing all the corners, found nothing, and began rolling about in the wood shavings. So now they could hold the house-warming.

For a whole year after that Egorka decorated his house with carving, fashioning each board lovingly, until he had no ordinary log house, but a little fairy-tale palace. There were carved peacocks on the shutters, two mermaids with big tails on the board over the windows, to keep happiness in the house, and two smiling lions under the roof-beam. You could see from afar that guests were welcome here.

And there were, indeed, even more guests than before. Some were building a new house, others had just built one and needed ornament, and some were learning to carve from Egor, as he was now respectfully called.

Instead of Black Homestead the village became called simply Homestead again.

The first to awake was the village cockerel. It was his job to start the day. He had to crow three times, the first time to clear his throat, the second time to wake people up, and the third time to get them out of bed.

Egor was up at the first crow and went down to the meadow to wash in the dew.

Why was the sun so wonderful today? Sparkling with all the colours of the rainbow, and frolicking about. It kept taking a dip in the river and then coming out again.



"It's St John's Eve today!" Egor remembered and began doing cartwheels round the wet meadow. That was a very special day.

St John's Eve was the day before Midsummer Day, the longest day and the shortest night, when the grass and plants grew heavy, full of sap, the fruit began to ripen, and the farmer's most important time–harvest-time– was not far away.

They prepared for the harvest in a special way. On St John's Eve they jumped over a big bonfire to purify themselves in the flames, ward off the evil eye and black magic, and, most important of all, build up their strength and high spirits before the harvest began.

In the morning the lasses decorated a young birch tree, that had been cut down, with gay ribbons, flowers and grasses. The lads laid a bonfire on the river bank, and kept trying to steal the birch tree and break it, as was the custom. But the lasses laughed and ran away, singing teasing songs:

The fire it burns on St John's Eve,
And our lads' bellies all are aching!
Well, serve them right and let them know
That St John's tree must not be broken!

In the evening the whole village gathered, young and old alike, dressed in their brightest finery. There was noise, laughter and singing everywhere. The old people joined the young in the merry-making. Old Afanasy and Grandpa Mikhei set about lighting the bonfire in the traditional way. Wheezing and grunting, they twirled a twig between their palms. The twig was placed on a piece of dry wood. The constant rubbing made the wood start smoking, and when they sprinkled some dry moss on it a tiny, flickering tongue of red flame appeared. That was

the only way you were allowed to light the bonfire on St John's Eve.

The flame leapt up, showering sparks in all directions. You'd get a good scorching if you didn't jump out of the way!

The bonfire, hot and roaring now, made everyone feel gay and a little fearful too. Now they had to hold hands and take a running leap over the fire in pairs. Not with just any partner, but with the person of their choice. If the pair did not let go of each other's hand, and if a trail of sparks followed them, they were sure to get wed.

The fire cast a bright glow over everything. Ribbons and sarafans, yellow, red and deep blue, danced and mingled as in a fairy tale. The wreaths on the lasses' heads were like royal crowns, and their eyes shone bright enough to burn.

They were all pretty, yet none could claim Egor's affections.

Then who should come up to him but Masha. Radiant in her best clothes and abashed by her boldness, she stood there twisting the ends of her kerchief.

"Let's go and jump, shall we, Egor? Only don't you go getting ideas. It's just that I'm afraid alone."

Egor grinned and took her by the hand. They took a run and flew over the hot fire like a pair of birds. They didn't let go of each other's hand, and a whole trail of sparks followed them like a fiery swarm of bees. Folk saw this and cried: "There's a fine pair for you!"

Masha pulled her hand away with embarrassment and ran off, accompanied by their gleeful laughter.

When the fire began to die down and the stars shone more brightly in the dark sky, the lasses carried the birch tree down to the river and threw it in, to quench its thirst

and call down rain upon the earth. The tree floated along on the dark water, with the lasses' wreaths bobbing after it in the moonlight. Where a girl's wreath lands, there her bridegroom stands. If the wreath doth drown, 'tis a bad omen. But that day no wreaths drowned, thank goodness.

The married women did not cast their wreaths into the water, but went off with their husbands and parents to have a steam bath. Each of them had a special besom tied with sweet-smelling grasses and bright flowers for the bath.

This was the moment the young folk had been waiting for. As soon as the older ones left, they threw off their clothes and dived laughing into the river. There they splashed and frolicked about to their heart's content. The water had special, life-giving powers that night, for the sun had bathed in it.

In the river the lasses blossomed like water-lilies, fairer than ever.

But where was Masha?

Everyone climbed out of the water, but there was no sign of her. Egor looked round in alarm. Could she have drowned? He asked the others. They had seen her go into the forest.

Egor rushed off to find her. Anything could happen to her in the forest on a dark night like this. He searched in vain. There was no sign of her. All around was an ominous silence, as if the forest was waiting with bated breath.

All of a sudden a black owl hooted overhead, and the forest came to life. There was no wind, yet the leaves stirred, the branches creaked and the trees swayed, then began bearing down on Egor. He was seized with terror. Shivers ran down his spine.



He remembered Grandma saying that all sorts of strange things happened on St John's Eve. He hadn't believed her, but now he saw she was right! From out of the trees shaggy paws with long claws seemed to reach out to grab him by the throat. He could hear a fearsome muttering. Dim lights flickered in the darkness.

Egor turned to flee and landed in some bushes. He heard a short, sharp cry ahead of him, then all was silent. It sounded like Masha's voice. Egor forgot his fear and ran headlong to the spot. His heart was beating fast, his face scratched and bleeding from the stinging branches. He must get there in time!

Running into a moonlit glade, he found Masha lying lifeless on the ground with a fern in her hand. Egor's legs collapsed under him. He fell on his knees and lay his head on her breast. Her heart was still beating. She was alive!

Brushing the hair from her face, he gasped with amazement. He was used to seeing Masha every day and had never noticed anything special about her. But now, as if for the first time, he saw how beautiful she was. The magic night must have made her look lovelier, or given Egor a new pair of eyes.

Unable to restrain himself, Egor kissed her warm lips. Masha's eyelashes quivered. She opened her eyes wide with fear.

"Oh, Egor! You did give me a fright! What are you doing here?"

"And what are you doing here?"

"I was looking for the magic flower. Grandad told me that every St John's Eve a single fern flower blossoms in the forest. And it leads the person who finds it to hidden treasure. The evil spirits bring gold and jewels out of the earth to dry, and stand around, keeping guard. But you



mustn't be afraid. You must go up and throw the flower at them, then they will be transfixed like idols. Put as much gold as you can in your skirts, but listen for the sound of thundering hooves in the forest. That is the fiery steed who will try to trample you down. Throw yourself on the ground and don't move an inch. No matter how close it rears on its hind legs, or how scorching its fiery breath, do not open your eyes. It will get tired and go away, and the gold will be yours."

"Why do you need that gold?"

"I didn't come for the gold. I wanted to see if it was true. So I was walking along all on my own, more dead than alive frightened out of my wits, looking for the flower. Suddenly something screeched behind me and started coming for me through the bushes!

"'Heaven help me!' I thought. 'I haven't found the flower, and the fiery steed is charging at me already.' Then I collapsed with fright... What are you laughing at?"

Egor was rolling on the grass, shaking with mirth.



"Ee, what a laugh! That was me coming through the bushes. Oo, I'll split my sides!"

Then he took hold of himself, sat up and wiped his eyes.

"So you didn't find the flower?"

"No."

"Well, I did."

"You did? Show it to me!"

"Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes. Egor picked up her little mirror and held it in front of her face.

"Look. Here's my flower!"

Masha gasped, hid her face in her hands and started to cry, the silly billy!

The blood surged in Egor's veins. He put his arms round Masha tenderly.

"Why are you crying? Don't you like me?"

"I've liked you for years! I'm crying for joy. You spend all the time looking at your paints and never take any notice of me!"

"That's not true, Masha. The paints have taught me to recognise beauty, to see you as you are. Will you marry me?"

"If you want me to, I'll leave all I have and follow you. But I'm afraid Grandad won't agree. He wants to find a rich husband for me."

"We'll send Grandma Akulina along. She'll soon make him see reason."

They came back to the village at sunrise, whispering about the happiness that awaited them and exchanging kisses, of course.

The cocks were crowing when Egor slipped into the house like a mouse. But Grandma was waiting for him with a broom.

"Where have you been all night, you devil? I'll give you a good hiding with this broom here!"

Egor embraced his dear old grandmother with a smile, hugging her thin, dry body like a great bear, and she calmed down.

"Well, tell me where you were then."

"I was looking for the magic flower."

"And did you find it?"

"Yes, Grandma."

"Where is it then?"

"Next door. I've left it with Old Afanasy. Will you ask him to let Masha marry me?"

Grandma sat down on the bench.

"Thank the dear Lord for that! He's got round to it

at last. I was beginning to think you were some kind of hermit, working all the time and never looking at the girls. Masha will make you a good wife. She's fine-looking and clever with her hands. Let's go and ask the old man now."

"Perhaps we'd best wait until evening. If he refuses, I'll be a laughing-stock."

"A refusal's not an axe-head, it can't bruise your brow."

But they decided to go in the evening, just in case. They put on their Sunday best. Egor was on tenterhooks, dressed in his white linen shirt.

When they arrived at Afanasy's house Egor's courage deserted him completely. He stood in front of the icon and crossed himself with trembling hands.

Masha ran out of the house straightaway and hid in the sunflowers. Her grandfather realised what was up at once, of course, but did not let on.

They sat down on the bench sedately, and broached the subject in a roundabout fashion.

"You have a beautiful flower, Afanasy, and we have found a fine gardener."

"What are you on about? Masha, is it? Oh no, dear guests. You must find another garden for your gardener."

"Why is that? Is he such a poor suitor?"

"No, neighbour. 'Tis the bride herself that's no good! When she looks out the window, the horse rears up with fright. When she goes into the yard, the dogs bark for three days. Between you and me, she's got eyes like onions, horns on her head, and such a big mouth that it needs laces sewn on it! And she limps in both legs and rolls her hump from side to side."

"Oh, Grandad, you'll be the death of me!" laughed

Grandma. "That's yourself you're talking about. Masha is a sight for sore eyes. And our young man's not so bad either. He's got hands of gold, and a finer lad you never did see."

"And you've got a fine fortune as well, of course. Two brooms in a box, and a mouse in a sack."

"That's true enough. We're poor, but we've got a good name. You know yourself what a master our Egor is. Skilled hands never want for money. Your granddaughter will fare well with us."

"Hmm. You can dream of fine fare, but you need a spoon to sup it."

At this Akulina grew angry.

"Who do you think you are? Bristling like a ruff, you old windbag! There's nothing but fish skins and fly wings in your old trunk either. If you're not careful, we'll take our custom elsewhere."

"Listen to her! Threatening to drown a pike."

"Look at that toothless old pike, Egor! What a sight! God forgive me! But I'll tell you one thing, Afanasy. You may want to look like a pike, but your heart has always been softer than wax. All the women in the village talk about it."



This made the old man melt, like ice in the sun.

"You're a crafty one, old girl! You'd talk the hind leg off a donkey. Still, that's enough confabulating. We'd better get on with the wedding."

Masha was called in. She stood there, eyes lowered bashfully, twisting her apron.

"Will you marry Egor, Granddaughter?"

"If you let me, Grandad."

"Well, that's alright then. Only we'll have the wedding in Shrovetide. Just in case there are any second thoughts. And you get some presents ready for your bride, Egor. I

want to see how hard you'll try to please her."

Egor racked his brains about what to give his bride. It must be something beautiful and useful that she would keep with her all the time so it would remind her of him. He couldn't for the life of him think of anything.

Then one day he went into a house where the lasses used to gather. They were sitting along the benches spinning, singing and giggling. Masha was there too.

Egor sat down and watched. He could not take his eyes off Masha. Her hands were so deft and nimble that no one could keep up with her, although her distaff was the poorest of all. It squeaked and wobbled as if it was about to fall to pieces. It had belonged to her great-grandmother.

"That's what I must make her," thought Egor. "It's useful and Masha will keep it all the time."

Next day he went into the forest to cut down a lime tree for the distaff. Limewood is soft and pliable. You can carve anything you like from it. It won't crack and it has a lovely golden sheen.

As he was walking along the river bank, he saw a white swan swimming along in the water, with a proud, curving neck and a beautiful chiselled head!

"That's how I'll make it!" he thought happily. "A distaff shaped like a swan."

He cut down a suitable lime tree in the forest, but did not strip off the bark, so it would not crack, and rubbed the ends with clay.

As soon as the lime tree had dried properly, Egor began to hew the base, the broad flat board into which the upright is fixed. Then he hewed the upright, like a small oar, from strong maplewood. He planed it well and smoothed it until the wood shone like gold. Now it looked more like a graceful bird than a distaff. No one

else had one like that. It was beautiful, but something was missing.

"What if I decorate it with carving and painting?" Egor thought to himself. So he carved some thin lines on the base with little scrolls at the ends. Then some tiny suns appeared, with strange leaves and exotic flowers.

But Egor frowned. He was still not satisfied.

He went into the yard and saw a tub of seasoned oak lying there. He split the tub into thin planks of wood and made two small black horses out of them with arched necks. Then he slipped them into the distaff base between the flowers. They fitted perfectly, without any glue. But just to be on the safe side he drilled two holes and carefully put some yellow limewood nails in, where the eyes and harness were. At once the horses came to life. Their harness jingled and their eyes shone.

Satisfied with this, he began work on the upright. "Now what shall I paint here?" he wondered. Then he remembered the moonlit night on St John's Eve and the fern flower. Only what colour was it, that mysterious flower? Red, blue or white? Probably like no other flower in the world–a black one! After all, that was the colour of black magic.

So he dipped his brush into black paint and painted a wondrous flower, black as night, with slender fern leaves curling round it. The black petals stood out against the golden board, persuading you that there was such a flower, if only you could find it.

At the top he painted a bright sun guarded on either side by Sirin birds to stop it fading. And under the sun a magic tree, covered with flowers, so the family would be strong. And under the tree he placed two lions with fine tails to protect it from harm.

When Grandma Akulina saw the distaff, she shook her head in wonder.

"No bride has ever had a present the likes of this, Egor! I wonder you're not afraid to give it to Masha. She might fall in love with the distaff and forget about you."

When the paint dried, Egor took the distaff to the lasses' get-together. He put it on a bench and it shone like the sun. The lasses left their work, ran up and formed a circle round it.

"We'll tell our young men to make us distaffs like that too. And if they don't, there won't be any wedding!"

Their young men sighed and scratched their heads. How could they compete with Egor? They even felt like giving him a bit of a thrashing, but he was a strapping lad, not to be trifled with.



So they had to make carved distaffs too, and paint them as best they could. Ever since then it has been the custom for a lad to give the lassy he is courting a distaff. For it shows the strength of the young man's affection.

Egor could hardly wait for the day when Masha would be mistress of his house.

"Why are you sitting around idle, my lad?" Grandma Akulina burst out one day. "Instead of counting the days to the wedding, you should make something for Masha."

"Make what?"

"Remember I used to have a painted box before the fire? Your grandfather bought it for me in Veliky Ustyug, to put my dowry in. Ee, but it was a fine one. Everyone



envied me! It was painted with all sorts of magic beasts and flowers."

"What beasts, Grandma?"

"There were lions with great manes, I remember, and a Sirin bird and a griffin."

"A griffin? What's that, Grandma?"

"Don't you know? It's a fearsome beast. It has the body of a lion, with a lion's mane and claws. And it has the wings and head of a bird with a sharp beak. Its tail is tightly curled, and it has no equal in strength and courage. It lives far away. All gold is guarded by it, and if any envious soul tries to steal it, the griffin tears him to pieces. That is why it is drawn on lids of boxes. To frighten thieves away."

"Oh, Grandmother! Why didn't you tell me about the griffin before? I will draw it on Masha's box too."

"What gold will she have for it to guard?" laughed his grandmother.

"Well, let it guard her against evil spirits, if there is no gold."



"There is another beast to do that. It is called a unicorn. It has the body of a horse and a magic horn on its forehead. With this horn it spears all evil things, and while it is fighting them, good folk stand round in a circle and sing:

'Tis not two beasts a-gathered,
Not two wild beasts in battle,
'Tis truth with falsehood fighting,
In mortal combat locked."

Egor set about his new task with a will. He cut down a lime tree and stripped off the thin, upper layer of bast. Then he bent it into the shape of a large box, overlapped the sides at the corners and sewed them together with

bast. While the bast was still damp, he put a fir wood base inside. When the bast dried, the sides of the box would fit tightly round the base.

With the rest of the bast he made two more boxes. A medium-sized one for dishes and a small one for Masha's earrings and beads. Then he fixed thin lids of fir wood to all the boxes with carved metal hinges.

In a few days' time the bast dried and the boxes were smooth and white. Egor painted the small box with slender blades of black grass and big red flowers, transforming it into a precious casket fit for the finest jewelry.

The medium-sized box, the one for dishes, he painted with gay scenes from everyday life. On one side a piebald horse was drawing a gaily painted sledge with Masha sitting in it and Egor holding the reins. He had raised the whip and was gazing up, because the Sirin bird with its brightly coloured plumage was flying overhead. The sky was full of bright flowers, and red and green leaves rose out of the snow higher than the horse.

On the other side of the box Egor and Masha had come home and were drinking tea by a large samovar. Terenty was rubbing himself against Masha's leg, and Blackie, the dog, was sitting by Egor. There were flowers everywhere, even growing out of the walls and table, like a magic garden. On the lid he painted a big, strong lion with a flowing mane. It would strike fear into the hearts of enemies, but to friends it would smile and wave its tail which was tipped with a flower in full bloom.



The sides of the large box for the dowry came to life with all the strange creatures Egor had ever heard of. There was a large parrot with a hooked beak, a unicorn with a pointed horn in its forehead fighting a lion, a proud, strong eagle, king of the heavens, and a stratim bird, sovereign of the deep. The stratim bird lives in the

sea. Whenever it sees a ship it flaps its wings and whips up the waves sending the ship with its crew and cargo to a watery grave.

On the lid the bold warrior Polkan the Centaur is galloping with his bow and arrow amid magic flowers and grasses. He has the legs, tail and body of a horse, and the chest, head and arms of a man. He is strong and can race like the wind. If he doesn't catch you, his arrow will.

And just in case a thief should try to open the box, on the inside of the lid was a fierce, winged griffin with a beak of steel to make him drop the box and take to his heels for fear of being torn to pieces by its sharp claws.

The time passed swiftly as he worked. Egor made a present for Old Afanasy too, an oak pillow box. It was a small trunk bound with strips of iron. The lid was shaped so you could rest your head on it at night like on a pillow. Egor did not paint any beasts on it, for Old Afanasy's head could guard his "treasure" better than any griffin.

All this time Masha was sewing her dowry with her girlfriends. She had long since woven white linen to sew shirts for her husband and children and made a pile of embroidered towels for decoration and everyday use. And she had embroidered some large table-cloths with flowers and roosters. They would be laid one on top of the other on the wedding table, and would be taken off one by one after each course, so the guests could admire the bride's needlework.



All she had to do now was put the finishing touches to Egor's wedding shirt. It was fit for a king! With such splendid embroidery on the collar, chest and hem that any bridegroom, even a real good-for-nothing, would

look regal in it, to say nothing of the handsome Egor.

Grandmother Akulina and her neighbours were busy preparing for the wedding feast which must have no less than nine courses. And Old Afanasy was not idle either. He had been entrusted with the task of persuading his valiant friend, Grandad Mikhei, to be master of ceremonies at the wedding. The old man was said to possess magic powers which could ward off evil spirits. They needed someone like that for the wedding to protect it from the evil one.

And so, at last, on the last Saturday of a bitter cold February, the day before the wedding, Masha's best friends came to wash off her "maidenly beauty" in a hot steam bath and chant mournful songs. Egor came along with his merry companions too. He bowed to his bride-to-be, handed her his painted gifts, and gave nuts and sweetmeats to her girlfriends.

When the lasses saw the fine boxes, they forgot all about the sweetmeats and exclaimed with admiration, praising Egor to the skies! Masha stood there happy and proud of him. Then it was her turn to give him the shirt. Now it was the lads who crowded round to look, their eyes goggling at such a splendid sight, and Egor blushed with pleasure.

The door in the lobby slammed and Old Afanasy came into the room out of the cold.

"Come along, lasses. Take the bride by her snow-white arms and lead her to the bath-house. I've stoked it up real hot!"

The lasses formed a circle round Masha, wailing as they led her off, while she chanted a sad song, as was the custom:

To a soapy bath they are taking me
Along the three little paths, oh!

And the lads rushed gaily into the street and strode across the deep snow in a merry throng to their bath-house. They were also going to have a wash, only with plenty of merriment, not a sad one.

After the bath they sat the bride on high cushions and began to comb her hair.

"Why aren't you crying?" her best friend, Dunya, asked her.

"I don't want to," Masha whispered. "I keep trying, but the tears won't come."

"Well, that won't do! You must cry before your wedding. I'll rub your eyes with some onion."

No sooner said than done. The bride sat on the cushions weeping her onion tears. But what tears were they? A mother's tears are like a rushing torrent, a wife's like a babbling brook, but when a bride-to-be weeps, it is like the falling dew. The sun will rise and dry it up.



Yet that morning, by her father's grave, she had wept in earnest.

As they prepared for the wedding service the girls again chanted mournful songs. They dressed Masha in a long white wedding chemise embroidered on the front and sleeves, with a full red sarafan covered in bright flowers on top. Under the sarafan, in hidden pockets, they put a piece of cake and tow for health, wealth and happiness.

From the street came a joyful tinkling of bells. The wedding train of five painted sledges had driven into the yard. The copper harness shone brightly and the shafts were adorned with coloured ribbons and little bells.

A merry throng climbed out of the sledges and entered the house. They were led solemnly by the master of ceremonies, Grandad Mikhei, with an embroidered towel around his waist, followed by the bridegroom and

guests. They all bowed low to the bride. Then Egor handed Old Afanasy the pillow box and received an icon from him. They sat down at the table and talked for a while, then Grandma Akulina rose to her feet and said: "Be so kind, dear guests, as to comb the bride's hair!"

The lasses stood round the bride, so the groom could not see her, undid her long maiden's braid, and plaited two braids instead, arranging her hair as married women wore it. Then the merry master of ceremonies ordered them to light the big twisted candles and get into the sledges. Egor and his friends would ride to the church on horseback.

When after much noise and laughter everyone had found a seat and calmed down, the master of ceremonies walked solemnly round the procession three times, chanting a magic incantation to protect the wedding:

"Hail, George the Valiant! Sit upon your white horse, take up your long spear and ride round me and the whole company. Build a white stone wall from earth to heaven to protect us."

Then the happy procession sped fearlessly on its way, protected by George the Valiant, to the little wooden church, with the ends of the table-cloths in the painted boxes fluttering gaily in the wind, so everyone could see what a fine dowry the bride had.

After the wedding the troikas raced off to Egor's house, where the feast was to be held. Now they were all singing happy songs! 'Twas time to cast off care and quaff mead and beer.

Egor and Masha sat bashfully with eyes downcast at the noisy table, eating and drinking nothing, as custom required. After the third course the master of ceremonies ordered the young couple to be taken to the cold



hay-loft to sleep. The feasting went on far into the night, and the twisted candles burnt until morning.

The years flew by like swift birds, one after another. Two daughters, Anna and Dasha, were born to them, and Egor and Masha had their share of all that life has to offer.





CHAPTER TWO

Summer was at its height. The barley had put forth its prickly whiskers, and the ears of rye were heavy with grain. A sea of gold rippled in the fields, gay cornflowers winking their blue eyes amid the waves. A scent of fresh ripeness hung over the fields. 'Twas a shame to cut this beauty down. But it was time to bring in the harvest, before rain or hail spoiled it.

Early one morning the women went out in white headscarves with sickles and began to reap. The first sheaves were put up like little tents, and the children followed behind, picking up all the ears that lay on the ground.

The sweltering heat made the sweat run into their eyes, and their backs were stiff as wood, but there was no time to rest. The reaping must be finished by evening. Those who had done their own plot helped their neighbours, and by evening the whole field was dotted with stooks.

The women stretched their backs, wiped their sickles with grass and began to frolic about the mown field.

"Stubble, stubble!" they cried, "give back my strength! For scutching and threshing and spinning a length!"



Grandma Akulina carried the first sheaf into the house and cried sternly: "First sheaf in the home, bugs and roaches begone!"

Next day Egor heard laughter and shouting outside. He opened the wicket gate and there on the grass a crowd of people had formed a circle round a strange man in a red shirt, who was dancing, strumming on a psaltery and shouting loudly.

"Do not tarry, be not shy! What you need, folk, come and buy! I have beads and braid galore, more than I can ever wear."

"It's a pedlar!" Masha exclaimed and rushed out of the gate, followed by the girls and grandmother. Egor went to have a look too. They didn't often see pedlars in these parts.

The ginger-haired pedlar had laid out his motley wares on boxes and was urging the crowd to come and buy.

"If you're tired of fish and beef, here are sugar cocks to eat! Take a bite and have a nap, eat some more when you wake up!"

The folk laughed and looked at his wares. The women made for the beads, rings and kerchiefs, while the men busily tried on the boots.

Some bought wares in exchange for money, others for a dozen eggs or some dried mushrooms. The pedlar took anything. Even onions would come in useful on his long road.

"Pins and needles, boils and warts! Thread, curd tarts, and herring tubs! A goat with earrings and an old man with horns!"

"Would you have brushes for fine work, pedlar?" Egor asked him quietly.

"What do you need them for? You an icon-dauber then? Show us your work, lad. Maybe I'll take summat for the fair."

Egor took the jolly fellow into his house and showed him everything, the painted distaffs, the carved dishes, the wicker baskets, and the painted bast boxes. The pedlar examined them expertly and clicked his tongue.

"I've never seen work like this afore, lad," he said. "It's a sin for you to hide away in the backwoods like this. You should go to the capital and work for the Tsar. You've heard about the terrible fire in Moscow, haven't you? Sent sparks flying up to the heavens and brought the bells down from the bell-towers. They're summoning masters from all over the country to build the city up again and make it fairer than it was before."

"What am I compared to city craftsmen?" Egor said, covered in confusion. "Just dross."

"It's true there are some great masters in Moscow the likes of which you'll never find elsewhere. Learn from

them for a year or two and maybe you'll throw off the dross. I'll take you to a fine master, Nikodim. He was a pupil of the great Dionysius. God grant he will teach you too."

He went on trying to persuade Egor, until Grandma Akulina could stand it no longer. She ruffled up her feathers, like a brood-hen, and let fly at the pedlar.

"What do you think you're doing, blockhead! Tempting our breadwinner away like that? Hasn't he got enough on his hands at home? He's not going anywhere. Why should he? He's got a family and a home to look after, not like you, you rolling stone!"

She gave him a good ticking off, but let him stay the night. All that evening Masha did not say a word, just looked sadly at Egor.



Egor tossed and turned all night in the hay-loft. He had seen icons from Moscow in the church and often sighed because he could not paint like that.

Next morning, when they had breakfasted on bread and fresh milk, Egor rose to his feet and said:

"Forgive me, Grandmother, Masha and my daughters. I have decided to go to Moscow. I cannot be content with painting spoons and boxes any more. I feel a greater power within me. I want to learn how to paint icons."

The poor women gasped and wept. But their tears were to no avail. Egor's mind was made up.

The pedlar laughed and bade Egor make haste.

"Don't grieve, lad! It's always the same with womenfolk. Can't get anything done without shedding a few tears."

So they put a clean shirt in his bag, with a loaf of bread, some cucumbers and hard-boiled eggs. And Egor bowed low and took his leave of them. Along the dusty roads



they went, over fields of hard stubble and tall blue grass, and past crystal clear rivers.

The nearer they got to Moscow, the more people they met on the way. Some were going to sell their wares, some to buy, and some to find their fortune.

Just outside Moscow they decided to spend the night on the river bank. The watchmen would not let people into the city at night. They lit a fire, and Egor lay down and gazed silently at the black sky, daunted by the huge, strange city. But at dawn when he looked at the hill on which Moscow stood, his heart beat loud and joyfully. There was the beautiful, majestic city, its golden domes shining in the morning sun! Sugar-white churches touched the pink clouds, and round it all was a high wall with pointed towers.

They passed over the wide wooden bridge across the River Moskva, rumbling with the wheels of carts and carriages. By the bank were hundreds of small boats loaded with sacks and barrels. And the bank itself was thronged with people, on foot, on horseback, and in carriages. Egor had never seen such a crowd. The air rang with shouting, whistling, the cracking of whips and the neighing of horses. There was a strong smell from the fish smoking-sheds. Merchants were vying with each other to lure customers to their stands. And the wares they had to sell!

"You stand here for a moment, lad," said the pedlar excitedly. "I just want to ask the price." And he disappeared into the throng.

Egor went off and waited by the stone city wall. Nearby stood a merry, well-fed young fellow without a beard. He had icons spread out all round him. "Let me take a look," thought Egor. Suddenly up popped a little old man with hair as white as snow. He was small, wrinkled and very frail. He picked up an icon, then another

and a third, and began to scold the lad who had painted them.

"You heathen, you clumsy ignoramus! How could you paint Christ and the Virgin Mary like that? Without arms or legs, only a torso and head. And where are the eyes and mouth? You've just put dots in place of them! If you met anyone who looked like that, you'd die of fright!"

"Don't buy it if you don't like it!" the fellow laughed. "Other people will."

"Yes, they will!" cried the old man, angrily. "And they'll defile their dwellings with your paltry images!"

"Let them, the fools," the fellow grinned. "It gives us a livelihood and fills our bellies."

"There are other trades for filling your belly. Not every man can be an icon-painter! Pack up your worthless boards and be on your way!"

This made the painter see red. He straightened up, siezed the old man by his grey beard and began to shake him angrily.

Egor felt his hackles rise. Fancy laying hands on an old man like that! He took hold of the lout and shook him so hard that it made his teeth rattle. "Let go of the old man," he said. "Or I'll give you such a walloping that your head will ache for three days."

"It's a plot, two against one!" the fellow wailed. But he hurriedly put his things together and made off.

The old man laughed and stroked his beard.

"Nearly pulled my pride and joy out by the roots, the dolt. Big of frame, but small of brain. Should be pulling up trees, not painting icons. Thank you for getting rid of him, my friend. And who might you be?"

"I'm from the country, Grandad. My name's Egor."

"And why have you come to Moscow? For business or pleasure?"

"I want to learn to paint icons. I'm looking for Nikodim. Have you heard of him?"

"I should say so! He's a ferocious old man with a sharp tongue, a heart of pepper and a soul of garlic. Gives his apprentices the devil of a time. If they do shoddy work, he roars like a lion and pulls off their ears."

"The beast!" Egor exclaimed.

"Aye, he's a real beast," the old man nodded. "And if someone doesn't do a job on time, the old man bends him double, ties him in a knot and throws him into the river. Would you go to someone like that?"

"Yes, I would," Egor said firmly. "People live even in hell, so I'd manage somehow. If only he'd take me."

"Well, in that case," said the old man, "I happen to be Nikodim. Why are you gawping at me like a goose at a flash of lightning? I expect the sight sends shivers down your spine, eh?" And he began to laugh.

"Take good note of what I said about lazy, poor workers, lad. I don't like that sort. But if you try hard, I'll give you all the secrets I possess. I won't take them to the grave with me."

Ding! Dong! The heavy chimes of Moscow's great bell-tower reverberated loudly and floated slowly over the city. They were echoed on all sides by the joyous ringing of a myriad other bells, large and small, which flooded the whole town. It fair took your breath away.

The old man wrinkled his eyes with pleasure, and Egor gazed upwards entranced, as if he were trying to see the sounds.

"That's enough. Come on, Egor. You could listen to this heavenly music all day. I'll show you the work done by my teacher Dionysius. I go and feast my eyes on it. I'm so afraid something will happen to it. When the fire gutted Moscow, I thought I would die of grief. So much

beauty burnt to ashes! Now nobody in Russia will ever know it existed. It's a miracle this work survived."

They walked up to the Assumption Cathedral, mighty and proud like a Russian warrior in the sagas of old. By the entrance stood a young monk in a black robe.

"You're too early," he said. "Come a bit later."

"I am one of the Tsar's chartered icon-painters," Nikodim said sternly. "And this is my apprentice."

The monk bowed reverently and stood aside.

Inside, the silent cathedral was so huge, majestic and solemn that Egor was quite overwhelmed. "Was this beauty really made by human hands, and not the heavenly angels?" he thought.

Thousands of candles lit the walls and columns painted with frescoes up to the ceiling. The iconostasis shone with gold and precious images.

"Here is Dionysius' work," Nikodim whispered. "Study it well and learn from his great love of people, his charity. How else could he have thought up such tender colours? And see how bold and pure the lines are, just like a song... Why don't you say something?" He looked at Egor, who was too excited to speak.

"Can you paint?" the old man asked cautiously.

"No, I see now that I can't paint at all..."

"Good lad," Nikodim smiled. "It's only ignoramuses wno think they can do everything. A real master is always afraid of not doing things as well as he would like. I spent ten years mixing paints for Dionysius, without ever picking up a brush. It was only in my old age that I began drawing the compositions. Still, it's time to go. The team are waiting."

They went out into the square. After the quiet cathedral it seemed even noisier and rowdier than before.

 Towards them came bearded men dragging two bears

on chains to entertain the crowd. The bears were roaring and straining at the lead, and their keepers banged tambourines, blew pipes and shouted to the crowd to come and watch the show.

The scent of the bears made some horses bolt suddenly, knocking over barrels of pickled apples. The merchants shouted at the carters and the carters at the horses. Then the Tsar's men appeared on horseback, clearing a path through the crowd with their lead-tipped lashes.

"Puts the wind up you after the country, eh?" Nikodim laughed.

They turned down a side street. There were fewer people here, but more ruts and pot-holes. Wooden planks had been thrown across muddy patches in places, but where there were none the carts sank deep in the mire. Right and left were fences of wooden stakes with heavy firmly-bolted gates. Each house was fenced off from its neighbours like a fortress. There were no common fences, because narrow passageways serving as gutters ran between the yards.

"Look at the houses," Egor exclaimed. "They're so tall and narrow, I'll bet there's not much room in them. My house would seem like a palace beside them!" The windows were mere cracks covered with mica just under the roof. And the plot of land inside the fence was barely enough for a small kitchen-garden.

"In Homestead we don't fence ourselves off from one another like that. It's so cramped here," Egor said hesitantly.

"Of course, it's cramped. Do you know how many people live here? Over two hundred thousand," Nikodim said proudly.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Egor. "What a lot!"



They took a few more turnings and finally stopped by a new church which had just been built. It was covered with ornament, like a fairy-tale palace. The walls were decorated with white stone carving and the five bright blue domes shone with golden stars.

"That's the one we're going to paint, the beauty," said Nikodim, affectionately.

"He's a nice old man," thought Egor. "That was all rubbish he said about being so ferocious."

Yet no sooner had they crossed the threshold of the church, than the kind old man was transformed. His bushy eyebrows beetled, his eyes blazed angrily as he rushed over and began berating the men who were sitting peacefully on a bench having a meal.

"What are you doing, you pack of heathens? Defiling the church with your feasting. This isn't an inn, you know. The Good Lord will chastise you, just you wait."

"With any luck we'll escape that chastisement," grinned Miron, a crafty-looking fellow. "A man's belly has a short memory, darn it. It won't let you work, until you've stuffed it."

"What's dear to the body is foul to the soul," Nikodim said severely. "I saw an icon-dauber in the square today. Instead of painting the heavenly angels, he paints worldly gluttons, like himself. I got into a scrap with him. Thanks to Egor here, we sent him packing though. Listen, Luke. Put Egor down in your book as a *kormovoy*, and then we'll see."

"What's a *kormovoy*?" asked Egor.

"It means you'll get food but no wages," the bald Luke replied gravely. "But only as long as there's work. When there's no more work, there will be no more food. What job shall I put him down for, Father Nikodim?"

"Well, since he's from the country, he must be fond of

woodwork. So we'll let him prepare the icon panels. Write him down for that. And you shall teach him, Miron. Come on, lads, let's get down to work. Get an adze, Egor, take some boards in the corner–but make sure there are no knots in them–and shave them till they're white."

Egor rolled up his sleeves, took a sharp adze into both hands and removed the first strip from a pine board. There was a smell of resin, forest and home. He began to feel more at ease. The chained bears, the angry tsar's men and the whole rowdy city slipped away.

He tried his best, afraid of disgracing himself. His hands were tired of being idle, and by evening almost all the boards had been planed.

"Why be in such a hurry?" grumbled Miron. "You can't do all the work in the world, and it won't bring you wealth, only bad health. Take it easy, lad. The sooner we finish, the sooner they throw us out on our necks. Where will you go then?"

"I can't help working hard. Tell me what else there is to do."

"Ee, the ninny," sighed Miron. "Put your tools away and we'll go off for some shut-eye. Sweep the shavings out of the church, if you must do something."



While Egor was sweeping the church, the rest of the team went home. Only Father Nikodim remained in the dark empty church. Egor squatted down unnoticed in a corner. He had nowhere to go.

The old man lit a candle and stood thoughtfully before a stretch of stone wall. He looked at it for a long time. The hot wax dripped on his hand, but he paid no attention. Suddenly he raised the candle and waved it in front of the wall, like a fiery brush, as if he were drawing something.

The tiny flame flickered as it glided over the wall. A sacrament was being performed. An invisible fresco was being born out of the darkness. On some stretches of wall the old man drew calmly and pensively, on others joyfully, with a smile, but when he walked up to the biggest stretch, a terrible change came over him. Standing there, grim and determined, his eyes burning with fury, he smote someone mercilessly with the candle, as if it were forked lightning.

And so Nikodim covered all the walls with his drawing, using up a good two score of candles, and only towards morning did he discover Egor. It gave him such a fright, poor old man, that he dropped his candle.

"Don't be afraid, Father Nikodim, it's only me," said Egor in confusion. "Forgive me for not telling you at once that I was here. I didn't want to get in your way."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the old man angrily. "I got such a fright, my legs nearly gave way under me. Hiding away like an owl at night."

He grumbled on as old people do, then calmed down.

"Surely you haven't been sitting there on the hard stone all night?"

"But I liked it!" Egor exclaimed passionately.

"You did, did you? It looks as though I've found myself a pupil in my old age," Nikodim muttered wearily, then sat down by the wall and fell fast asleep. Egor took off his heavy peasant coat and covered him carefully with it...

That night Nikodim took Egor to live with him in his lonely little wooden house. His only possession was a trunk bound with strips of iron which contained some



old sheets of paper with tracings of the most famous Moscow, Pskovian and Novgorodian icons. There too, right at the bottom, was another precious object, a large manuscript book in a wooden leather-bound cover.

Each evening after work Nikodim would wash his hands, light the candle, then get out the book carefully and painstakingly teach Egor to read. The book was a very entertaining one, about the bold Prince Bova, whose strength and valour were quite extraordinary. He could kill thirty thousand warriors single-handed! And the strange things that happened to him!



Father Nikodim would be fast asleep on the warm stove, but Egor could not put the book down.

"And King Marcobrun did order them to raise an army of 40,000 men and kill Bova, but they were afraid and said: 'Your Majesty, King Marcobrun! We cannot catch Bova, and will only lose our lives. But you have a strong knight, Sire, whose name is Polkan. He has the legs of a dog, but from the waist upwards he is a man. He takes seven-league strides. He could catch Bova up and capture him in no time. But Polkan is locked in a dungeon behind iron bars.'

"And King Marcobrun bade them let Polkan out of the dungeon and send him after Bova. And Polkan galloped off with his seven-league strides."

Egor's eyes were closing. His head nodded down until–bump–it hit the book, and Nikodim jumped up.

"What are you reading for at this time of night? Go to bed, or you'll be blinking like a dormouse tomorrow, and don't expect any mercy then!"

"In a minute, Father Nikodim. There's only a bit left." He ran out onto the porch and let the cold autumn rain fall on his face, then he hurried back into the house shivering and went on reading.

"And Bova took his sword, mounted his trusty steed and rode off bareback to face the fierce warrior Polkan. The two strong warriors met, Bova lunged at Polkan with his sword, and Bova's sword flew out of his hand and was half-buried in the ground. Then Polkan smote Bova with his cudgel, and Bova fell from his horse dead to the ground. And Polkan mounted Bova's steed, but Bova's trusty steed took the bit in its teeth, and galloped away over through bushes and forest, until its legs were torn to the very bone. And Bova lay dead for three hours, then got up as if nothing had happened, and went to his wife Druzhevna in her tent, and lay down on the bed."



Then Egor, like Bova, would sleep like a log for three hours, jump up in the morning, fresh as a daisy, and get to the church before Nikodim. So Nikodim never had occasion to "bend him double and tie him in a knot". On the contrary, he praised him often and revealed many secrets to him.

One day, for example, they had run out of the glue Egor used to stick the boards together. They could not work. What was to be done? Then Nikodim said: "That's no great calamity. Run to the butcher's, get a pan of fresh blood and mix it with lime. That'll make fine glue."

When the glue on the panels had dried, they did not begin to paint them at once, but first put several layers of gesso on them. To make the gesso Egor ground three sacks of chalk into powder, then mixed this powder with transparent fish glue and spread it thinly over all the panels with a wooden trowel. As soon as one layer dried, he put another on, and another until there were five. And then he took some stiff horsetail and polished the boards until they were a velvety white.

The gleaming white boards stood shyly along the wall, waiting to see who they were destined to become. The only person who knew that was Nikodim, who drew the compositions.

"Well, my lads," he announced solemnly one day. "Tomorrow we start to paint. So you must all have a good steam bath today, to wash your sins away, and come here nice and clean tomorrow."

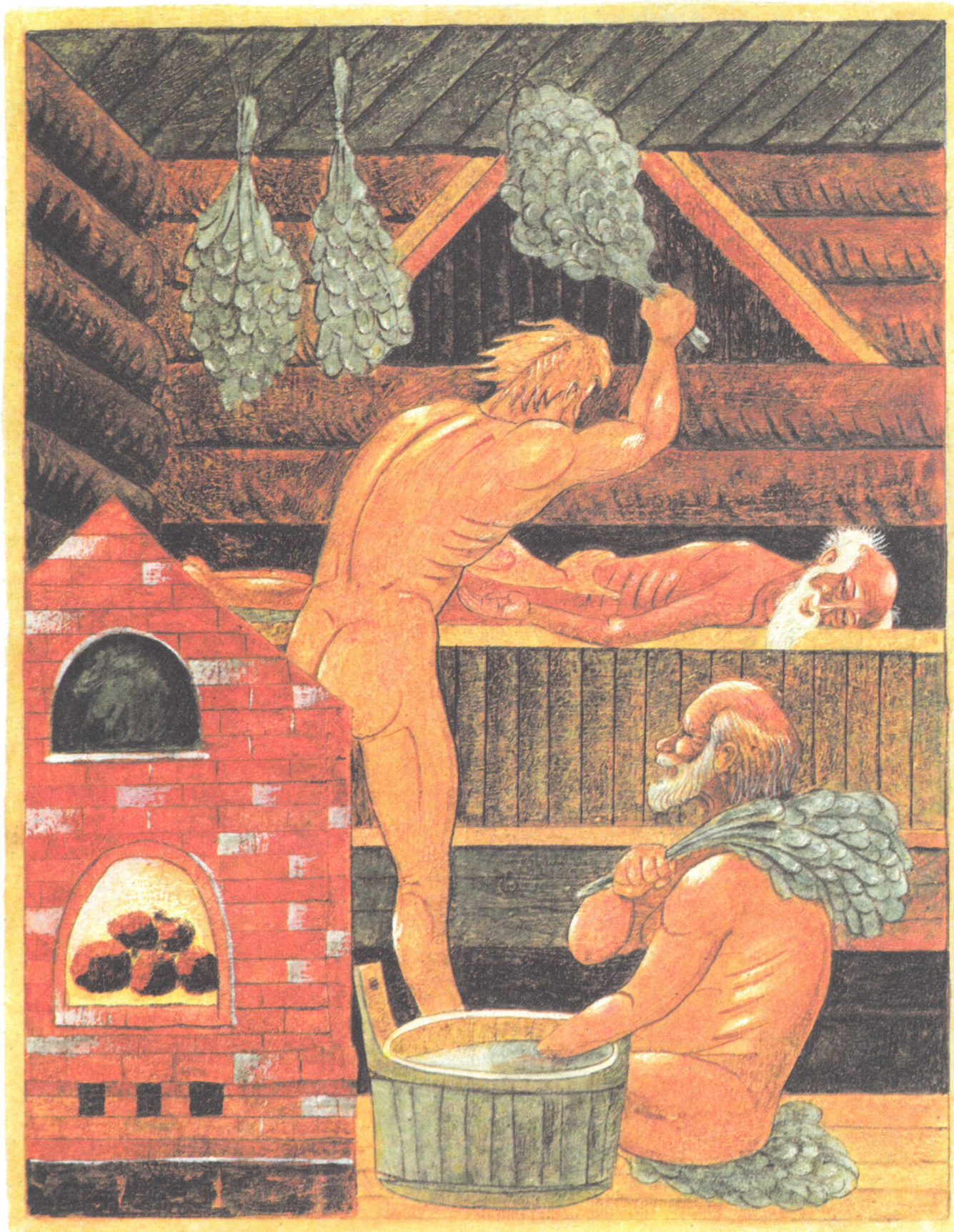
Nikodim's bath-house had fallen to pieces long ago, so he and Egor went to the practical Luke's. Luke's wife had scraped the floors and benches in the bath-house with a knife until they were white. She had fetched some fine-tasting water from the river for the large boiler and stoked the stove nice and hot. The stove had no chimney, so the smoke drifted out through the open door into the yard. The walls and ceiling were black with soot, but that made the bath-house heat up quicker and stay hot longer.

The men went in first, when the steam was hottest. While Luke and Egor were getting undressed in the lobby, Nikodim threw off his clothes in a trice and went into the scorching heat. He even scooped water onto the red-hot stones to make them steam. There was such a strong smell of the forest from the birch-twig besoms, that your lungs didn't want to let it out.

"Come on, Egor! Let yourself go! Give me a good hiding with the besom," Nikodim urged him, hopping up to the top shelf where the steam was so hot, you felt like a baked potato.

"Come on!" he taunted. "Don't be afraid! You won't kill me with a besom. I'm not a fly."

"I can see that," Egor grinned. "Flies aren't so skinny." Then he did as he was bidden and gave Nikodim such a hiding that the old man could barely crawl off the



shelf. The sweat rolled off him. He gasped and wheezed, with a blissful smile, as if he had feasted on the apples of paradise.

"Remember how that Dutchman Jakob had a steam bath here last winter, Luke? The one who came to teach us how to paint. I treated him to what you gave me today, Egor. Put him on the bench and thrashed his back with a besom. But he squealed like a pig and rolled off the bench, cursing like mad! 'I foreigner!' he says. 'You not raise your hand against me! Why you fighting me with branches, old man? I paint good, don't I? You thrash yourself, if you have done wrong! Savages! Devil take you!'"

"Look!" Egor said suddenly. "There's a frog in the corner."

"It's been here all summer," Luke smiled. "Saucy thing. As soon as you heat the bath-house, it turns up. Crawls out black as anything and croaks for joy. Not afraid of the heat!"

"Come on, Egor. Let's have a bit more steam. My ears are getting cold!" Nikodim shouted.

Egor splashed a mug of kvass on the red-hot stones and the heady smell of barley filled the bath-house. You could almost taste it. They beat one another several times more, then put on clean shirts and walked through the garden into the house, as fresh as could be. Now it was the women's turn to "torture themselves".

Next day the whole team arrived at the church, clean and solemn. In Old Russia that was how they always prepared to do battle or some important task.

"God be with us." Nikodim crossed himself with a flourish. "I shall begin to paint Saint Nicholas. Luke and

Egor can transfer these tracings, and the rest of you know what to do."

They placed a large panel in front of Nikodim. He dipped his thick brush into the red paint, waved it about in the air, mentally preparing himself, then began confidently to paint the outline of St Nicholas in a single graceful line. Why Nicholas first? Because the church was dedicated to him.

Meantime Luke showed Egor how to do this new job of transferring a tracing. They took a large tracing of a winged Archangel Michael, which Nikodim had brought from his precious trunk, placed it on a gessoed panel and stuck the corners down carefully.



The actual tracing was done like this. First of all the composition of the icon was outlined in garlic juice. Before the juice dried, a sheet of paper was pressed onto the icon and rubbed gently with the warm palm of the hand for a long time, until the garlic left lines on the paper. Then the sheet of paper was laid on a piece of felt and dots were pricked along the lines with a pin, so that when you held the paper up to the light you could see the whole composition made up of tiny pin-pricks.

After that Luke and Egor took a small cloth bag of black charcoal dust and began to tap the tracing with it. The charcoal dust went through the pin-pricks onto the white gesso and when the tracing was carefully removed, you could see the fine dotted outline of the winged angel on the panel.

"Now take a needle and scratch the outline along the dots," Luke said. "But be careful not to smudge the charcoal with your sleeve."

Egor did as he was told, hardly daring to breathe for fear of smudging the charcoal dust.

Nikodim came up to have a look.

"Mind you don't scratch the gesso right down to the board," he said. "You've done a good outline, fine and bold as the angel himself. He wasn't even afraid of the Good Lord, you know."

"What do you mean?" Egor asked in amazement.

"Well, it was like this," Nikodim began. "The Lord called Archangel Michael to him and said: 'Fly down to earth and take the soul of such-and-such a sinful man there.' So Michael flew down and saw the man had eight children. He felt sorry for the man and said: 'How can I take his soul, Lord, for he has little children? They will starve to death!' 'If you refuse to obey me,' said the Lord angrily, 'you shall live on earth.' And he took away Michael's gold sword and wings and made him live on earth for three years."

"Well, I never," thought Egor. "The saints try to help the poor, but the rich still have an easier time on earth."

Now it was the turn of the gold leaf painters. The places on the icon to be covered with gold leaf were first painted with red paint so that it would shine through the gold. Then the thin leaves of gold were placed very carefully on the wet paint, with a hare's paw, so that the gold did not stick to their fingers.

It was slow, painstaking work, which could not be hurried and kept them busy right up to December. On St Barbara's Day there was a bitter frost. That evening Nikodim staggered home with a big bundle. His nose was red, his moustache covered with icicles, and he was shivering with the cold.

"When Barbara freezes, mind your ears and noses!" he laughed. "I've brought you a sheepskin coat, Egor.

Can't let you freeze, you'll be no use to me as an icicle! Here, try it on for size."

"Thank you kindly, Father Nikodim," Egor was moved by the old man's concern. "I won't forget it. Where did you get the coat?"

"From a widow who lives nearby. Her husband was flogged to death last week."

"What for?"

"His little boy ran out of the gate into the street, when one of the Tsar's men was driving along drunk in his sledge. Instead of turning aside, he drove his horse straight at the lad, just for the fun of it, as if the boy were a dog. The boy's father was chopping wood in the yard and saw it all. He took his axe and threw it over the fence at the man. The butt struck him in the back."

"Did it kill him?"

"No, just bruised him. But they flogged the boy's father to death for it... He was a good man. What will his widow do now with three small children? I took her a bit of money and some flour, and she gave you this coat, the good soul. Wear it, don't be squeamish."



When the gold leaf had been applied, it was time to start painting. The mixers set about breaking up the paints with their fingers in wooden spoons without handles and mixing them with egg yolk and kvass.

Egor was amazed as he painted. The longer he looked at the paint on the panel, the more it seemed to shine from within with a mysterious light.

"Good lad, Egor!" Father Nikodim praised him. "Take a look a this, Miron. Not the way you splash it on, any old how."

"So what?" Miron grinned. "It makes no difference.

You can paint over the crooked lines and cover them up with lacquer."

"I don't understand you, Miron. Don't you care about anything?" Nikodim spoke quietly. "You give yourself no pleasure and others no joy. The simple folk who come to church can't read or write, only see. Will they enjoy looking at your crooked faces? You should try harder, take pride in your work."

Egor tried so hard that he grew quite thin, mastering the secrets of this new art. Sometimes Nikodim almost had to drag him out of the house by force. "Go out and enjoy yourself, lad. It's Shrovetide. Folk are making merry."

"I can't," Egor sighed. "How can I make merry, when my wife and children are pining for me at home. How are they getting without me? Have they got enough to eat? Has anyone mistreated them? There's nobody to take them a present..."

"April 'burn the snow' will soon be here, and we'll send something with your pedlar friend. And if, God grant, we finish the work by the end of the summer, you can go home yourself."

"Can I!" Egor exclaimed with joy.

"Yes, you can," Nikodim replied sadly. "But will you come back, son? I can't manage without you now. My own son, Vladimir, was beheaded by the Tsar's men in the village church seven years ago, for trying to stop them looting it. He was an icon-painter too... Then God sent me you, lad, to take his place... What are you gawping for? You'd do better to gawp at the stove. It's almost out. What's the use of keeping you here, if you can't even fetch some firewood?"

The old man was so worked up that he muttered and grumbled half the night on the stove-bench. He was

angered by the thought of his solitary life, and even more by what he had just confided.

In the church the face-painters had already begun their work. Painting the faces and hands was the most difficult job, requiring great skill, a keen eye and a steady hand. The faces had to shine with wisdom and beauty, and could only be painted by a master with a pure heart.

Nikodim talked quietly as he painted the face of Saint Parasceva.

"Woman is weak, but her love is strong. Nothing can shake her loyalty. One day the town where Parasceva's relics lay was besieged by a horde of Saracens. There were so many of them and so few townspeople that there could be no thought of salvation.

"The Saracen king broke into the town and decided to take Parasceva's sacred relics away with him. It was then that her great loyalty showed itself.

"Thirty horses tried to pull her coffin, but it did not move. The king saw it was to no avail and said: 'Bring me as much gold as your saint weighs and I will leave her here.'

"The townsfolk brought all the gold they had and weighed it on scales, with the relics in one pan and the gold in the other, but the gold kept tipping the balance. They removed some of the gold, but still it tipped the scales. So they went on taking away gold until only fifteen gold coins were left. And that was the price they paid to escape destruction.

"What a fine story, eh! Try painting scenes from Parasceva's life along the borders of the icon, Egor. Then whoever looks at it will learn about her as from a book."

Egor pondered. What a hard job Nikodim had given him! Still, it must mean he thought Egor capable of it.

First he divided the icon margins into sixteen squares and then, beginning in the left upper-hand corner, he began to paint the story of Parasceva's life in the squares. He used his finest brush, because he had to paint very small. When he came to the Saracens breaking into the town, he remembered how the houses in Homestead had burned, how the terrified people had rushed about in the flames and smoke, and how the nomads had trampled them down with their horses and smitten them with their swords. He remembered it all, just as it had been. And painted it just like that.

The masters stood round him, and Nikodim stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"You've made that up, Egor," he said. "There's nothing about that in the stories about the saints' lives."

"That's what it was really like," Egor replied, quietly but firmly.

"Yes, I can see it was, because you have painted it as if you saw it happening. But the Church does not like people taking liberties. The Church says you must do everything as prescribed by the canons. And we'll be for it, lads! But what sort of masters would we be, if we didn't paint anything new, and only copied blindly from tracings all the time? After all, churches are different, aren't they? You never find two alike. It would be a sin for us to give them all the same icons."

"Aren't you afraid?" asked the cautious Luke. "You must have heard about the heretics who were burnt to death."

"Yes, I have," Nikodim replied calmly. "But they didn't touch Ivan Fyodorov, the first printer of books. So with any luck we'll get away with it."

At that moment the door flew open and in rushed a man in a torn shirt. There was blood on his head, terror in his eyes, and he was white as a sheet.

"Save me, good folk," he gasped hoarsely. "Hide me, for the love of God!"

"Who are you?" asked Nikodim sternly. "Not a thief by any chance?"

"I'm no thief. The Tsar's men are after me!"

Outside they heard galloping horses and men shouting.

"Where can I put you?" cried Nikodim in alarm. "There's nowhere to hide here."

Egor grabbed the man's arm and dragged him quickly into a far corner piled with work things.

"Close your eyes, quick!" he commanded and scooping up handfuls of whitewash he splashed it over the man's face and clothing. Until you would never have recognised him.

"Here's some bast," Egor told him. "Rub it over the wall, as if you're whitewashing it."

The Tsar's men had already burst in through the open door.

"Stop, heathens!" cried Nikodim, so loudly that it echoed under the dome. "How dare you enter this holy place bearing weapons! I shall put a curse upon you."

"Shut up, you old crock. Keep your mouth shut!" they retorted, but moved back a step or two warily. "Tell us where you've hidden the fugitive."

"I haven't seen any fugitive. Where could he hide here? There are no secret rooms or cellars in this church."

"Where can he have got to?" the head guard asked suspiciously.

"I don't know and I can't say. That's your job, my hearties. We're busy enough as it is."

"Yes, I can see how busy you are. The walls are bare, but you're covered in paint!" the head guard scoffed, pointing at the fugitive.

"I've been meaning to get rid of that blockhead for years," said Nikodim angrily. "But who needs a dolt like that? Perhaps you would take him?"

"We've got quite enough blockheads as it is!" the soldiers chortled and ran out of the church.

Nikodim sank down weakly on a bench.

"Well, looks like we got away with it," he said. "You're a sly one, Egor! I'd never have thought of that. Hey there, lad. Come here! Don't be afraid. Put that bast down. Now tell us why that pack of wolves was after you. What have you done?"



"All I've done was to serve as a boyar's steward in Novgorod the Great," replied the man, quaking all over, his eyes darting about wildly. "The Tsar himself came to visit us, with his soldiers, princes and chosen men. He was met by Archbishop Pimen with crosses and wonder-working icons. But the Tsar did not kiss the cross. Instead he began to abuse Pimen in great anger. 'You bear not a cross, foul heathen, but a sharp sword, and with that sword you would pierce my heart and hand over our state to the King of Lithuania, Zygmunt August. Henceforth you shall be not a bishop, but a wolf, a predator and destroyer!'

"And straightway he ordered his men to loot all the churches, empty the coffers, and take the ancient wonder-working icons, the gold vestments and the bells also. Then he sat in judgment and ordered the boyars of Novgorod with their wives and children to be brought before him and had them tortured."

"Dear Lord, what evil-doing!" Nikodim crossed himself in horror.

"And that is not all," the man whispered loudly, with a crazed expression in his eyes. "The rest were taken to the bridge over the Volkhov. And they were all pushed into the river from a great height! I can still hear their cries to this day. Beasts! Foul beasts!" The man's voice rose to a shriek, and he burst into terrible sobs. He thrashed around convulsively on the floor, as the masters watched, transfixed in horror.

"Drink this water, dear friend," wept Nikodim. "Why do you torment yourself so, my son?"

They gave him some water, but his hands were trembling so much that he could not lift it to his mouth and splashed it down his shirt.

"Then the Tsar had all those who remained brought before him and looked upon them meekly, saying: 'All the blood that has been shed is upon the head of the traitor Pimen. Do not grieve, but live on in gratitude.' And he let them go, but bade the soldiers take Pimen and all those in disgrace such as me to Moscow in wooden cages as an example to others. But by some miracle I escaped..."

The poor soul finished his terrible tale, seized his head in his hands and fell silent.

"Where will you go now, friend?" Nikodim embraced him.

"I shall hie me to the steppe over the Volga," the man replied sadly. "I have heard that fugitives from all over Russia find shelter there."

The masters found some food and clothing for him, each giving what he could. Then he bowed low to them and went off into the night.

They had finished painting the faces on the icons. Now



they had to do the highlighting. All the parts that protruded, cheekbones, chins, foreheads, fingertips, and the folds of the clothing were flecked with thin white lines, and the panels acquired depth. Nikodim examined them all carefully for the last time, made the necessary corrections, and said: "That is all, lads. With God's help we have finished the iconostasis. And we have nothing to be ashamed of, eh? Now the icons must be varnished. But you come with me, Egor."

He led him to a barn in the courtyard, latched the door and took a small canvas bag from under his robe.

"What is that, Father Nikodim?"

"I shall tell this secret to you alone, my best pupil," the old man whispered. "But swear that you will not take this secret with you to the grave, but will pass it on to another master."

"I swear," Egor said solemnly, kissing the cross.

Nikodim undid the bag and poured some small yellowish stones onto the table.

"This is amber, a precious stone," he whispered. "Crush it in a mortar and mix it with the varnish. It will make the varnish glow."

Egor did as he was bidden. He crushed the stones and sprinkled the gleaming powder into the varnish. It began to dance with pinpoints of light.

They went back to the church and covered all the icons lying on the tables with a thick layer of this secret varnish. The colours under the shining varnish shone a hundred times more brightly, as if flooded with an inner light.

The masters stood around, feasting their admiring eyes on the icons in silence.

"Why are you so quiet?" asked Nikodim. "Are you bidding them farewell? That's right. The icons have a life

of their own now. I always bid them farewell, as if they were my children. The only comfort is that this beauty will give people joy. Now, Luke, it's time to give the masters some joy. Pay them their earnings for the six months, whatever is due to each of them."

Luke took everyone into the storeroom, got out the thick ledger where he had written down who had done what and began handing out payment. The apprentices received a pood of flour and oats and the masters two poods of flour, two barrels of beer and a barrel of honey. The most skilled masters got an extra half pood of salt. And Egor was among them.



Nikodim gave all the men three days' rest, to go and help on their homesteads, to plough the vegetable plot, repair the house and simply spend time with their family. While he lay down and rested. It was as if the job now completed had sapped all his strength and now only his weary soul remained.

Egor moped with nothing to do and went across the river to breathe the fresh forest air.

How green and quiet it was over the River Moskva! A great peace filled the earth up to the very dome of heaven. Far behind him lay the vast city with its walls, fences and sturdy gates. Gone was the crazed and bloodthirsty Tsar as if he had never existed, and gone were the anxious thoughts.

Egor stood alone in the blue air, filled with a lightness and joy that one feels only in childhood.

Here and there on the sunlit rises were patches of bright yellow coltsfoot and at a distance the birch trees with their fresh green leaves looked like children's curly heads.

All of a sudden high up in the sky Egor heard a sound like a babbling brook. He ran into a glade and looked up. Across the blue sky below white clouds a flock of swans was flying south. Their heavy white wings were already beating overhead, and the very last one turned its head, looked at Egor and called to him like a friend.

How he longed to fly off with them to his dear Homestead, where his grandmother, wife and children were waiting for him, and Terenty the tom-cat too; where the shy bluebells and delicate poppies of his childhood were blooming; where fair mermaids splashed quietly in the River Merrilee on warm nights, and a lame woodsprite wheezed in a hollow trunk in the pine forest. And at home behind the stove lived a small house goblin, who got up to his tricks at night, hiding the spoons and spindles, and if you didn't catch him and wind his beard round the table legs, he would never give them back.

Then there was Petka the rooster. He never crowed on the fence, only on the roof. He would stand on the very ridge beam and crow with all his might, then spread his great wings and soar down like an eagle, his green and red feathers gleaming in the sun, like the legendary Sirin bird. Perhaps he really was a Sirin bird, who had been changed into a rooster by a magic spell.



Homestead! My dear Homestead!

The day Egor saw the white swans he made up his mind to leave Moscow and go home. But first they had to paint frescoes on the walls of the church. He could not let down Nikodim and the others.

Luke and the apprentices had already purchased all they needed in the trading rows and carted it back to the yard, and merchants from Rostov had delivered 150 bar-

rels of ten-year-old lime.

They had soaked the flax and scutched it into fibres in good time, five weeks ago, and now they twisted it into bunches and cut it up fine. The lime gesso would flake without flax.

At the same time they had mixed the lime with water, sand and flax in large pits in the yard and stirred it each day with a wooden spade.

Nikodim divided the work between the masters.

"Miron, take Grigory and Andrei and put scaffolding up under the dome. And make sure it's done properly. If it gives way under anyone, God forbid, don't expect any mercy."

"Listen to him," grumbled Miron. "I do the work of two as it is, but he's forever grousing at me to do more."

"Egor, Istoma and Nikifor, take the wooden nails and hammer them in between the bricks leaving a good space between them. Make sure the heads are two fingers away from the wall."

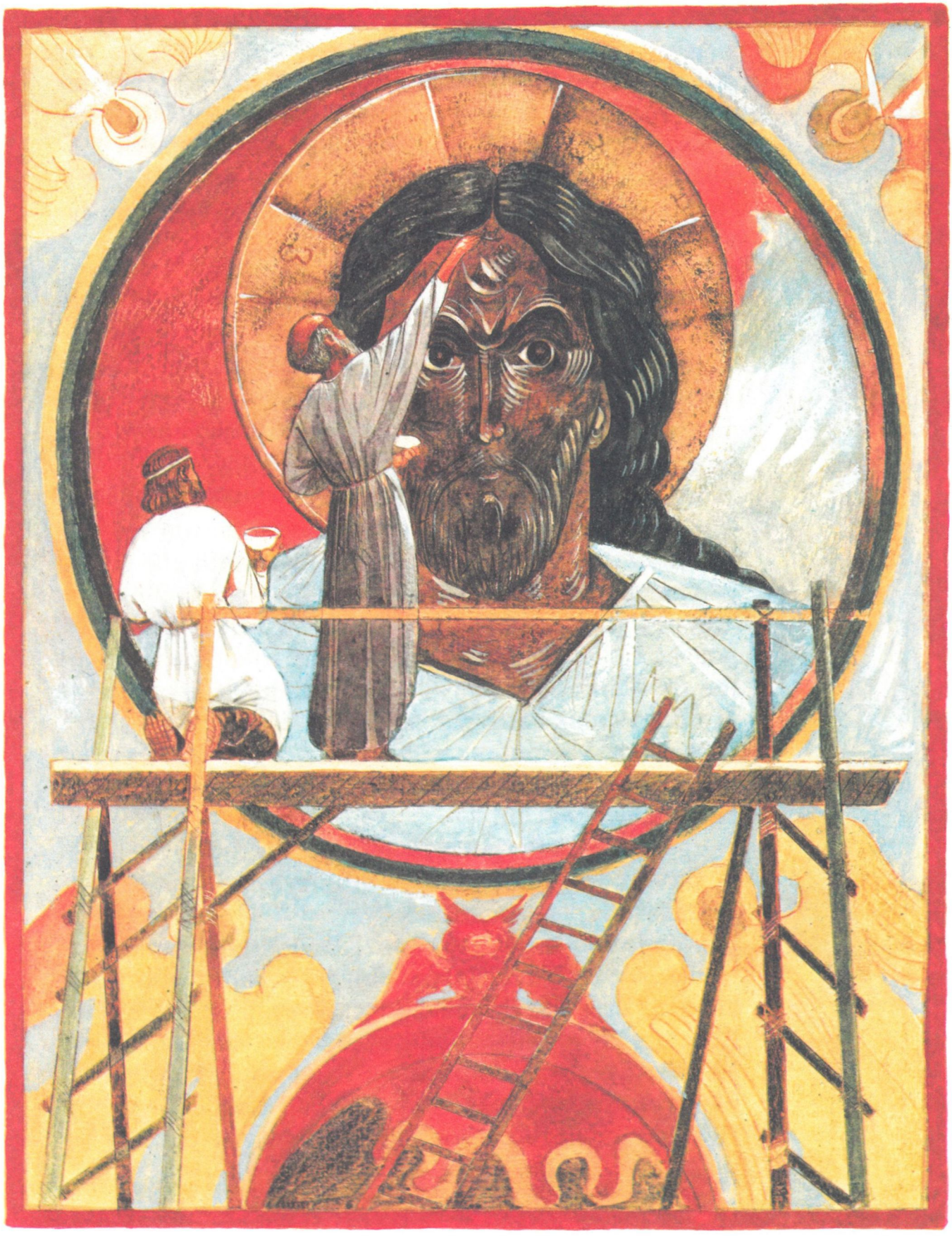
"Why is that, Istoma?" Egor asked quietly.

"So the gesso does not come away from the wall."

At last a week later, when the gesso in the pits was ready and the scaffolding up under the dome, Nikodim again ordered them to wash in the bath-house and come clean to church.

In the morning, when they had all gathered there, Nikodim said a prayer and told them solemnly: "Now, with God's help, start putting on the gesso, and don't forget to wash the wall with water first, or it will not stick."

So the masters began to wash the top of the wall, put on a thick layer of gesso and smooth it over with iron trowels. When the first layer had dried, Nikodim ordered the paint to be mixed.





They mixed the dry paints with water and egg yolk on large smooth stones and stirred them for many hours.

On the third day Nikodim climbed to the top of the dome and cried out: "Bring three tubs of gesso up here! But mind how you step. Miron's scaffolding is pretty shaky."

"It's safe enough!" snapped Miron.

"Like a cow in a saddle," Luke grumbled, angrily. "Now then, mind your backs."

They dragged up the heavy tubs.

"Make the second layer thinner and twice my height, no more."

"Why so little?" Egor asked in surprise.

"Because you can only paint on it while it's still wet. The paint binds with the lime and stays there forever. So you put on as much gesso as you can paint at one go. If you paint on dry gesso, it will flake off."

When they had covered the dome with gesso and polished it with sheepskin till it shone, Nikodim began to draw. Boldly and quickly he outlined the head of Christ in a single line of thin red paint.

"Go over the outline with a knife, Egor. Get a move on or it'll dry up! It's got to be painted by dinner-time," Nikodim hurried him.

Egor cut into the gesso, soft as dough, along the lines of the drawing, while Nikodim mixed greenish-brown paint for the face and hands.

"Won't the face be too dark?" Egor asked cautiously.

"I'll give it ochre and white highlights afterwards! Remember that in wall-painting you always go from dark to light. If only it was the same in real life," he added with a sigh. "There would be fewer dark patches and more bright ones. I can't forget what the Tsar did to Novgorod. Even savage nomads never wreaked such havoc."

He waved his brush for the last time, then stepped aside. And from the dome a pair of terrifying eyes, dark and accusing, stared down at Egor, making him start back in dismay.

All that hot summer the masters painted the high cool walls, the steep vaults, arches and pendentives of the church.

On the walls where Nikodim had drawn frescoes visible to him alone with a candle that night, there appeared pensive angels in blue, pink and lilac robes. And they did not stand apart, but mingled with ordinary mortals, who ploughed, sowed and reaped under their protection.

On the biggest stretch of the wall, opposite the sanctuary, where Nikodim had struck someone furiously with a candle that night, the *Last Judgment* blazed up with crimson fire.

It was terrible to look at this wall. Shivers ran down your spine as you saw the black devils with bared teeth and iron hooks dragging sinners who were screaming with fear and pain to Satan himself. And Satan with bloodshot bestial eyes seizing them in his sharp claws and tossing them into his fiery jaws.



One day the pedlar who had brought Egor to Moscow came into the church. "I'm off to the north before the trouble comes," he said. "Those Tatars from the Crimea are advancing on Moscow again. The times we've beaten them, but they're still coming back for more."

"Hear that, masters!" said Nikodim gloomily. "Let's finish the work as quick as we can. The infidels will be here in no time, then we'll be brandishing axes, not paint brushes."

All that was left now was to gild the haloes and paint the inscriptions.

"Egor!" Nikodim called from the scaffolding. "Warm up the varnish and mix it with ochre! We'll put on the gold."

They beat the gold leaf from coins, each coin yielding up to a hundred tiny leaves.



The whole team worked until evening laying the gold on the hot varnish of the haloes. Hundreds of small suns shone out from the walls! The church was a fine one indeed. Solemn and majestic, yet not like a proud prince, whom no one dare approach, but like the Russian countryside which never turns anyone away. It has solace and a cheerful word of advice for each and every one.

"Now the dusk has come to visit us too," Nikodim announced, wearily. "Stop work and climb down, lads."

"But what about you?" Luke asked.

"I want to take a look at the work from the dome."

No sooner had Nikodim climbed up, than the door opened noiselessly and into the church crept the Tsar's counsellor Ivan Viskovaty.

"And now black night itself has come," Luke hissed between his teeth. "That owl will start to sniff out treason with its hooked beak."

Without saying a word, as if no one were there, the counsellor began scrutinising everything carefully, quickly and furtively, with his ferret's eyes boring into the frescoes. He raced from wall to wall, like a dog following a scent, exclaiming and crossing himself.

"So this is what you're up to!" he kept chanting. "A real nest of heretics, this is! Satan himself must have guided your brushes!"

"Are you out of your mind, man?" Nikodim shouted from above, so menacingly that Viskovaty's head shrank

into his shoulders with fright. "Where can you see sedition here? Rub your eyes. They must be dazzled by denunciations!"

"I see sedition all around!" squealed the counsellor stabbing the walls furiously with his sharp finger. "Here! Here! And here! The saints are standing next to ordinary mortals, as if they were equals, and instead of praying the mortals are labouring in front of them. Look here. This woman reaping has got her sleeves rolled up to the elbow. It's disgraceful! You have no respect for the canons!"

"You're a bashful one alright, ashamed to look at a woman's elbows!" Nikodim thundered from above. "It was from 'canon-lovers' like you that my teacher Dionysius fled north to the Therapont Monastery, so you wouldn't fetter his hands with your bans."

But the counsellor did not hear him and went ranting on ever more wildly.

Turning suddenly, he saw the *Last Judgment* and recoiled as if he had stepped on a snake! His eyes bulged, his arms flailed and his mouth hung open, the words stuck in his throat.

"Whom have you cast into Satan's jaws, rogue!" he shouted hoarsely. "'Tis the Tsar himself! The Tsar himself! Treason!"

The counsellor rushed to the table where the brushes lay, seized the largest, stuck it in a pot of black soot and ran towards the *Last Judgment*, brandishing the brush like a sabre.

With two paces to go, he raised the brush threateningly.

"Stop!" A furious cry thundered from above. "Do not dare!" At that moment a crashing sound came from the dome, some bits of broken board fell down and Nikodim thudded onto the stone floor.



It was all so quick that Egor, who had seized the counsellor's arm, did not realise what had happened. Only when he saw the blood flowing from Nikodim's mouth and the old man's bewildered, helpless expression, did he understand what a tragedy had occurred.

"Did I fly down in time?" Nikodim's dying lips whispered. "Is the wall undamaged?"

"Yes, yes, Father Nikodim," Egor replied with a catch in his voice. He made to raise the old man up.

"Don't touch me, son!" Nikodim cried out with pain. "Leave me here. I haven't long to go..."

"But how did it happen, Father Nikodim?" asked Egor, choking with tears.

"I leaned on the rails and they gave way... Miron didn't nail them properly..."

"Just you wait, scum!" Egor sprang to his feet. "Where are you?" And he seized Miron, white as a sheet, by the throat.

"Let go!" croaked Miron. "I am dying!"

"Leave him be," whispered Nikodim. "It's bad enough for him as it is... If he hasn't become a master, he can't become a man... Where's the counsellor?"

"Run off," said Luke. "Gone to tell the Metropolitan most likely."

"The Good Lord did not let me lay my head on the Tsar's chopping block... Do not grieve for me, lads. Not everyone has the good fortune to die in a church. Forgive me if I have caused any of you offence..."

The men hung their heads and wiped the tears with their sleeves.

"Bend down," Nikodim's voice came faintly now. "This is my last word to you. If any one of you should hide the talent God has given him and not hand it on to others, he will be damned by Christ to eternal tor-

ment . . . And you, Egor, take my place . . .” Then a shudder ran over his body and he said no more.

The next day the team quietly buried their old master in a small narrow coffin in the courtyard of his last church, then each went silently on his way, as far as he could from his sovereign’s displeasure.





CHAPTER THREE

The bright moon was fading in the sky, when Egor left Moscow. He wore simple light clothing tied with a sash, carrying a stick to protect him from dogs and robbers and a knapsack on his back. The knapsack contained two lollipop roosters wrapped in white cloth for Dasha and Anna and a red horse for little Vanya. He was sure a son had been born while he was away! There was also a ker-

chief for Grandma Akulina, not too bright, and for Masha a silver ring with a red stone like a glowing ember. For himself he had taken a dozen of Father Nikodim's brushes to remember him by.

And that was all. Worked three summers and earned three turnips, as Old Afanasy used to say. Yet Egor was carrying a great treasure with him. His hands had learnt a new skill, his eyes had grown keener and more retentive, and his heart bolder and more confident. He felt he could do anything he set his mind to.

How free and open the countryside around him was! In Moscow something always got in the way: stone walls, sharp palisades, boyars' backs or crippled beggars. But here, in the open, you could see right up to the far horizon.

Egor walked at a pace. He was too late for the sowing, but he must try to get back for the harvest. Sometimes he walked at night too. One night a strange mishap befell him. He was given a good thrashing. And not by men, but, to his shame, by womenfolk!



This is what happened.

One warm summer night, around midnight, he came to the outskirts of a village. It was as quiet as the grave. Then suddenly a terrible banging, shouting and wailing broke out.

"What can that be?" thought Egor in alarm. "Is it witches holding a sabbath?"

Then a crowd of women came out of the last house. Their shifts loomed white in the darkness and they were barefoot with their hair hanging down. Shouting and screaming, they banged frying-pans, stove-vents, sickles, scythes and oven forks with all their might! And right at the back an old woman was dragging a heavy plough, cutting a furrow in the ground.





"What on earth are they up to, the brazen hussies?" Egor frowned.

At that moment the women saw him and cried out all together: "There it is, the cow plague! Beat it, girls, beat it to death, so it does not kill our cattle!" And some set upon poor Egor, with their oven forks, frying-pans and sticks, while others pulled his hair!

"What is the matter with you? Have you gone crazy? I'll give you 'cow plague'!" Egor shouted. "Out of the way!"

Covering his head with his knapsack like a helmet, he battled his way through the crowd, pushing the women off with his other arm, and took to his heels. What else could he do? Women and demons are two of a kind. They'll beat you to death for nothing at all.

Behind him the women began chanting triumphantly. And they marched round the village once more shouting, banging and singing.

The village men must have known about the ploughing and kept to their beds. They knew that anyone the women met while they were ploughing would be taken for the "cow plague" and beaten mercilessly.

But Egor knew nothing of this custom. So he hid in a haystack by the forest, pressing a dock leaf against his swollen eye and rubbing the bruises on his head.

Again there was peace and quiet all around.

Egor lay with his head outside the stack, gazing at the stars. The whole sky was shining with them, like precious stones sewn on a black canopy.

"Where do they come from? Is it true that the Good Lord crumbles up the old moon into stars?"

Then one of them suddenly moved across the black sky leaving a white trail behind it and disappeared. Grandma Akulina used to say that a falling star meant war.

"The omen was right this time," Egor marvelled. "Those women waged war on me alright!"

He lay in the warm sweet-smelling hay and fell asleep. Early next morning, when the dew was on the ground and the early mist was hiding from the sun in the ravine, he was woken by ominous sounds.

"Is that the women still battling against the 'cow plague'?"

Looking in the direction of the village, Egor saw that the houses there were on fire! He sped across the field to give help, but as soon as he reached the first house, he realised the fire had been started not by peasant wood-chip lights, but by horsemen brandishing torches! They were galloping about wildly with gutteral cries, like wolves in a flock of sheep, their curved sabres cutting down the innocent folk who ran out of the houses.



Egor's blood boiled. "Foul beasts! I'll pay you back for my father and mother!" He sprang like a wild cat onto a horse dashing past, grabbed a pitchfork and charged full tilt at the enemy, piercing one of them like a rat.

"Come on, lads!" he cried. "Don't just stand there! Get axes and cut them down, the heathens!"

Seeing what a champion they had, the men took heart and began smiting the horsemen from their saddles, some with scythes, others with shafts. They fought desperately, killing half of them, and the rest whipped their horses and galloped out of the village.

In the heat of the battle Egor and two village lads rode off after them. Suddenly by the forest the horsemen split up and encircled them.

"Ha, ha, Russ! So we've outwitted you, eh?" sneered the leader, while the others rode up slowly and aimed their arrows at them.

"Say a prayer to your god! You'll soon be drinking tea with him!"

Egor was seized with rage.

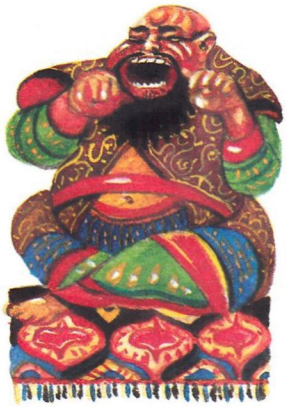
"Don't laugh too soon, vermin! For every bear there's a pointed spear!" he shouted, flinging the pitchfork at him. But it missed and only knocked the fur cap with a fox's tail off his shaved head.

The leader bared his teeth in fury.

"So the Russian is a brave bear, is he?"

He barked something in his own language, and lassoes came whistling at Egor and his fellows from all sides. They were jerked from their saddles onto the ground and dragged along over the prickly scrub and jagged stones to captivity on the other side of the dark forest.

The sweating horses dragged the blood-covered captives a good five furlongs until they reached the enemy camp. Then they took off their lassoes and flung them on the ground where another seventy prisoners from other villages were lying. Egor looked around him in horror.



The steppe was black with Tatar hordes, like a swarm of locusts. As far as the eye could see there were bonfires, covered waggons full of booty and herds of frightened cows and sheep waiting to be slaughtered. The wolf pack lived on what they plundered, sowing death and destruction all around. The pedlar had been right. The Tatars were advancing on Moscow.

All that sweltering day and all night Egor lay on the ground. His shirt grew stiff with dried blood and stuck to his wounds. The pain made him see red circles before his eyes. Beside him lay men grinding their teeth with pain and cursing furiously.

"Never mind, lads, take heart. A man can survive in hell," Egor comforted them, barely able to move his swollen lips.

All of a sudden the leader who had taken Egor captive galloped up and shouted savagely:

"Hey, you jackals! Those who want to serve our ruler, follow me. The rest will have their heads cut off and hung up on stakes to dry!"

The men scowled and said nothing. They would rather die than follow him. But then Egor stood up and said:

"Take me to your ruler. I will serve him."

The men gasped, and the leader gave him a contemptuous look and led him away.

As they were walking through the camp, Egor took note of everything, and by the time they reached a sumptuous tent he had already thought of a plan.

In front of the tent on a fine Persian carpet squatted the "Ruler of the Universe" himself, devouring a leg of lamb. He was a mountain of fat, with a red, bloated face.

"Well, bold Russ, will you fight for me?"

"Wait till my wounds heal, then we'll see," Egor answered.

"Why have you come to me? Do you want to be the first to die?"

"I have come to you because I don't want to die at all. If you let me live I will give you a present that no other ruler in the world possesses."

The khan roared with laughter and his fat belly shook.

"What's that, a cow's pancake?" he squealed. "Perhaps you want to give me your beard? I've got everything else."

"Wouldn't you like to gaze down from the heavens on all your domains like a bird?"

"Five moons ago I ordered my men to lie on the ground and make a mountain of human bodies. I rode up this living mountain on my horse and my head touched the sky. But even then I did not see all my lands."

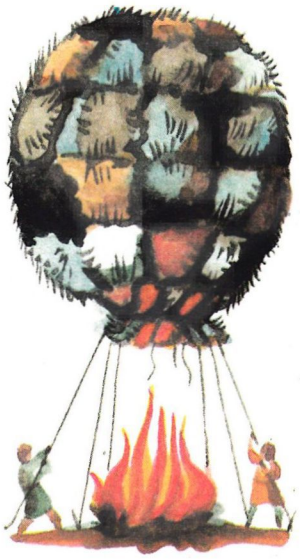
"I will lift you higher, to the very stars."

"How will you do that, sheep's head?"

"Order them to get me one thousand sheepskins. My fellows and I will make a great balloon out of them and fill it with hot air over the fire. It will take you higher than any mortal has been before."

"Ha, Russ! Your sheep's head has indeed thought well. I will give you the skins. But if in seven suns you do not lift me to the heavens, you shall fly there yourself as black smoke. I will burn you and your fellow Russes."

Egor bowed low before him, cursing to himself as he went on his way. "May the Devil eat you up with kvass," he thought. "Pot-bellied pig."



Gritting his teeth, he made his way through the whistling, mocking laughter and stinging strokes of the lash to his fellow countrymen and heard one of them say angrily:

"Sold yourself for a piece of pancake, Judas? It's a pity my hands are tied. Never mind, I'll tear out your throat with my teeth tonight."

"That's enough, you fool. Be quiet," Egor replied calmly. "Listen, lads," he whispered, so the guards would not hear. "I've thought of a plan. If it works, we will be free. Only don't ask me about it, just do as I say."

The men said nothing, thinking it over. Then the one who had been captured with Egor said:

"I have seen him in battle. He won't let us down. Tell us what we must do."

Next morning, as soon as the sun peeped timidly over the horizon, the horsemen brought a whole mountain of sheepskins to where the captives lay.

"Now, brothers, get to work," Egor said. "We've only seven days. Take sharp bones instead of an awl and tendons instead of waxed thread and sew the skins together,

five across and one hundred down, to make a sort of long carpet."

The guards cut the ropes round their wrists and they began to stitch the skins together. Anything was better than lying idle. For some reason Egor was covering the skeleton of a cow with skins.

Six days flew past as they laboured. Ten men died of their wounds, but the rest sewed away as hard as they could.

Towards evening the "Lord of the Universe" himself galloped up on a piebald stallion with his guards.

"Hey, Russ! Is the work finished?"

"We shall finish tomorrow, like we agreed," Egor replied.

"You'd better, Ginger Beard. My bonfire is ready." He lashed his horse and raced off into the steppe.

The first star twinkled timidly in the sky, followed by another. Their last night had come.

"That's enough," Egor said. "Stop sewing. Now gather up the sheep skulls and bones and tie them to the skins."

"What do we need all that rubbish for?" the men asked.

"Be patient, you'll soon find out."

So they began gathering the skulls and bones in the steppe. The ground was strewn with them, for the nomad warriors looked after their bellies well. Meanwhile Egor stole up to their physician's cart and took a bag of brimstone and some dried herbs. Then he boiled some water in a large copper pot over the fire and threw the herbs into it, adding some opium poppy. The heady smell wafting out of the pot made the horses snort and the guards jump up and shout excitedly:

"Hey, Russ! You brewing beer?"

"Oh, no," Egor replied. "Strong tea to warm up the lads."

"Give it here! We're frozen stiff. The lads'll warm up tomorrow on the bonfire." They snatched up the pot and drained it dry. Then the potion began to work. They dropped their pikes and sank to the ground unconscious.

Egor leapt to his feet, eyes shining.

"Come on, brothers, it's time to get going. Catch the horses and line them up in pairs. Then get the sheepskin carpet and cover the horses with it. Only the wool must be on the outside."



"But what's the point of all that, Egor?"

"It'll make a terrible fire-breathing dragon and it will save us."

The men looked and, sure enough, the horses under the shaggy cover reaching to the ground looked like a huge dragon with a hundred legs!

"Ee, what a terrible sight!" They crossed themselves. "But where's the head?"

Egor tossed aside a pile of dry grass and under it lay a huge dragon's head with gaping jaws. The men started back with fright. Looking more closely, they saw that the fearsome teeth protruding from its jaws were the ribs of a cow skeleton covered with sheepskins.

"Lift up the head, don't be afraid," Egor hurried them. "Now tie it to the first pair of horses. Then crawl under the skins and when I whistle, whip the horses with all your might and shout for all you're worth."

When the men had darted under the skins and seized hold of the horses' manes, Egor lit a torch from the fire and climbed into the dragon's head.

"Come on, lads, no shilly-shallying!" And Egor whistled so loud that his steed reared up in fright. The men lashed their horses and howled like wild beasts.

And off they sped.

The enemy warriors were woken up by the commotion and peered into the darkness, not knowing what had happened. There was a terrible din and the ground shook from the pounding of something that was drawing nearer and nearer. Then all of a sudden a burst of flame revealed the fearsome, fire-breathing dragon. Huge and shaggy, it was making straight for them! Its terrible jaws belched flames and yellow smoke, its eyes blazed with red sparks, white bones and skulls rattled at its sides, and it roared fit to make your blood curdle.

Pandemonium broke loose! The horses went crazy and began racing round the camp, neighing wildly. They trampled down the Tatars who were yelling with fright and running about madly.

"Come on, lads! Come on!" Egor shouted furiously, shaking some more brimstone onto his torch. That was what sent the flames, sparks and yellow smoke out of the dragon's jaws.

The fire-breathing dragon raced over the fallen tents and trampled nomads and disappeared howling into the night.



The sweating horses gradually slowed their pace until they finally came to a halt. Out of the stuffy sheepskins and onto the ground fell the men. They laughed and embraced one another with joy, and some even wept.

"But where is Egor?"

They rushed over and knocked off the dragon's head. There sat Egor, hunched up and clutching his head.

"What's the matter, Egor?" the men asked in alarm. "What's happened?" They took his hands from his face and gasped with horror. It was burnt so badly you could not see his eyes.

"Dear Mother of God!" the men crossed themselves.



"What a terrible thing! The brimstone must have got into his eyes. How will you manage without your eyes?"

"I don't know..." Egor replied in a hollow voice. "You ride off home. They'll be after us soon if you're not quick."

"But how will you find your way home? It's not right to leave you like this."

Yet no matter how hard they tried to make him take someone to show him the way, he refused. So the men bowed low to their rescuer and thanked him, trying not to look at his face, then galloped off with heavy hearts.

Egor touched the reins lightly and rode off, he knew not whither, groaning with pain and swaying in the saddle.

"No," he thought bitterly. "I must not go home and sit by the stove all day, a burden to all. If Masha and the little ones saw me like this they'd be frightened to death. Why be a blot on the sky? Better to be food for the bears or wolves. At least I shall be of some use."

The horse neighed softly and halted. Egor felt a cool breeze and heard a sound like a river nearby. He climbed down and slapped the horse on its flanks.

"Off you go, lass! Or the wild beasts will get you too." Then he fell face down in the wet grass and lay there...

Masha was restless. She darted about the house like a bird in a cage, unable to spin or sleep. She knew in her heart that something had happened to Egor, and some invisible force was pulling her out of the house. That night she went out of the gate, and her feet took her down to the river. She ran onto the bank, her heart beating fast. Looking anxiously around she saw a black horse in the mist on the opposite bank. It looked at Masha and neighed softly, then nodded its head as if calling her.

Masha felt a pang of foreboding. The horse did not

augur well. Without knowing why, she stepped into the mist-covered river and swam over to the other side. No sooner had she stepped out of the water, than she saw her long-lost Egor. Just fancy that! The horse had brought him to his native river.

Masha cried out and knelt down by her husband.

"Who's that?" Egor lifted his head out of the grass.

She jumped back in horror, pressing her hands to her mouth to stifle a terrified cry.

"It's me! Me!" she whispered. The tears welled up within her and she could not utter another word.

Egor turned away. "Leave me," he said. "You don't need me like this."

All Masha's tears dried in a flash.



"What do you mean by that? Who needs you, if not me? Grandma Akulina and I will heal your wounds by the spring. She knows some magic spells and secret grasses. Who cares about good looks, it's eyes that matter. The young lasses won't give you so many saucy glances, but I will love you even more... So get up and I'll help you onto your horse. Whoa, lass. Come on, lass. Off we go!"

"She doesn't understand Russian."

"Maybe she doesn't, but she thinks like a human being. Fancy her helping me find you like that," Masha replied, softly, stroking the horse tenderly and kissing her on the nose.

It was beginning to get light, as they swam across the river and set off for Homestead. The wet horse was steaming and trembling from the cold. Masha walked along, soaked to the skin, but she did not notice it. She pressed herself against her husband's leg, looked at him, all hunched up, and her eyes shone with happiness more radiant than when she was a young bride...

A clear dawn or a sunny day were as black night to Egor. For over a month now he had been sitting on the bench by the stove. His idle hands lay on his knees like broken wings, his head was bowed, and he sat in silence, turning over thoughts as heavy as stones.

As rust eats iron, so sorrow eats away a man's heart.

It was quiet and cheerless these days in the house. Sometimes of an evening Masha would tell him how she and her daughters had been sweeping the hay into stacks, when a hare popped out of the stubble like a little grey goblin and frightened them to death! Dasha fled for her life, Anna sat down with fright and covered her head with her dress, while Masha jumped back and landed on the rake. And the rake gave her a hefty whack on the back!



Everyone laughed, except Egor, who sat there as if he were made of stone. Masha would tell them another funny story, then dash into the lobby and sob her heart out, only silently so Egor would not know, and slip back as if nothing had happened.

Grandma Akulina would not let the tears come. She had no time for that. Each day she went to the forest to pick grasses and set about healing Egor with these fragrant herbs and her magic spells.

At early dawn, so no one would see and put the evil eye on her, she went down to the river for ice-cold water. Then she poured the water into a wooden pitcher and whispered: "A thunder cloud came from the east. And out of that cloud flew a fiery arrow. It struck away the blemishes from God's handservant, Egor, from his fair face, his bold heart, his keen eye and his black brows, from his hot blood and black spleen. These words are sharper than spear and knife, a key in the sea and a lock in the field. Amen!"

Then she drew a cross on the bottom of the pitcher with a knife and splashed the water in Egor's face.

"Ugh, Grandmother!" Egor shuddered. "Still muttering all that nonsense of yours! I'm fated to be blind to the end of time."

"Oh, no, Grandson! I'll stick to you as fast as burr. Weep and mope, but don't lose hope. Nearly all the scars on your face have healed. You'll soon see with your own eyes, if you don't believe me."

And with her withered hands, gnarled from working in the fields, she lay damp leaves and bitter herbs on his eyes and bound them carefully with a white cloth.



So each day Akulina tried to send Egor's malady on to sharp knives, into the deep sea, to the golden pike who sits in a gilded rock or to the rotten log where food and drink lay for such maladies in the dark forest. She believed that Egor would get well, and sought to drive away his black thoughts with this faith.

One day in autumn when the grey sky was watering earth with its mournful tears, Egor was alone with little Vanya. A son had been born to him, just as he had expected. Egor sat silently on the bench as usual, and Vanya crawled round the floor, trying to catch Terenty the cat. The cat was too quick for him and kept slipping out of his small hands. Who likes being pulled along by the tail? Vanya sat down in the middle of the room and began to howl miserably.

"Now then, what's all the fuss about, cry-baby?" said Egor. "Crawl over here to me. Look what I've got!" And he felt around on the table for a spoon or something else to use as a toy. There was nothing on the table except some rye bread covered by a towel. He broke off a piece of soft bread, without any crust, because little Vanya couldn't chew crust yet.

"Here you are. Have a bit of bread."

But Vanya only screamed "Me want pussy!" and howled all the louder.

"See this little dicky bird hopping about," said Egor, moulding the piece of bread into a bird with a short beak and a big tail.

Vanya stopped crying, scrambled onto his father's knee, snuffling, and stared at the dicky bird.

"The birdy's laid some eggs." Egor rolled five little balls of bread along the table. "And some baby birds have hatched out of them." In a flash five fat baby birds appeared, sitting quietly round their mother. And Vanya sat quietly too.

Then Egor rolled out a bread sausage on the table.

"Now the mother bird has brought her babies a nice long worm for their dinner."

"And a poon?"

"They'll all get spoons and we'll make them a table and benches to sit on." On they played until Grandmother came home with her granddaughters to find the bird family well equipped with pots and pans and what have you. They were sitting on benches at a rye-bread table spread with bread cucumbers, apples and even special twisted loaves.

"Well, I never, Egor!" Grandmother exclaimed. "Did you make all that yourself? How could you do it without seeing?"

"My fingers just seemed to know what to do," said Egor bashfully. "I'm sorry I've wasted so much bread, Grandmother."

"Don't worry about that, my love! I'll bake some more, and we won't throw this away either."

Dasha and Anna said sulkily: "We've been digging in the garden all day, but Father hasn't made anything for

us, only for bare-botty Vanya."

"Well, instead of sulking like that, you two lassies would do better to bring your father some clay from the creek. Then he'll make something for you too."

"What are you thinking of, Grandmother!" exclaimed Egor angrily. "Messing about with clay is not a man's job!"

"A poor job's better than good thieving, lad. Make them something. Your hands'll dry up from being idle."

Meanwhile Anna ran down to the river for black clay, and Dasha brought some red clay from the creek. They wrapped it in a wet cloth so that it wouldn't get dry, and next morning stood an old bench in front of their father with the clay on it.

"The red clay's by your left hand, Father, and the black is by your right with a bowl of water for washing your hands. Mind you don't knock it over!" said Anna. "Make me a red dolly with black plaits by this evening."

"And make me a dolly too and a horse and cart," said Dasha quickly.

"Me want pussy," cried Vanya.

"Well, there's nothing for it now, lad," Grandma Akulina smiled. "You've got the orders, now get down to work!"

And off they went to the garden.

Egor took a handful of red clay and squeezed it thoughtfully. It was warm, heavy and had no smell.

"Alright then," he sighed. "A dolly it shall be. You sit next to me, Vanya, and help me. I can't see, so I might put her arms on the wrong place."

Vanya snuggled up to his father, and watched him with bated breath. A clay woman was taking shape in his father's hands.

 "Now we'll give this fat merchant's wife a nice big

skirt," said Egor, laying a strip of clay round the figure. "And do some frills on it."

He pressed the edges of the skirt turning them into fine flounces.

"Then we'll stick on the arms with sleeves. The merchant's wife doesn't like working. She stands with her hands on her hips, ordering people around."

He dipped his fingers in the water and smoothed the doll all over. It shone proudly.

"No eyes," Vanya wriggled impatiently.

"Fetch a twig from the besom and make two little dots on her face with it."

Vanya did as he was told.

"Can she see now?" Egor asked sadly. "If only someone could make me see with a magic twig..."

"Me want pussy!" Vanya did not let him mope for long.

"Give me some black clay then," said Egor and rolled a fat cucumber. "We'll make a nice fat Terenty with a head and ears of red clay. You can do his eyes, Vanya. And we'll make his paws red, too, and give him a tail that is a whistle. And when he blows his whistle all the mice will run into the forest. Now let Terenty dry, while you and I make Dasha a pretty dolly."

"And Mummy?"

"We'll make her a little black horse with a long tail, like our Star has got, and a man with a beard on her back. Then we'll make a goat with horns, a cow with a little bell and a mummy pig with her piglets. They'll lie round her, drinking her milk and squealing."



So they sat all day until evening came. The bench now looked like a busy market place, with bearded men, women carrying buckets and babies, horses with pointed ears, cows with big horns, a cat and a dog dancing to-

gether, some strange beasts with wings, all shouting, mooing, pushing, and singing songs, just as if they were real.

What excitement there was when everyone came home.

"Look at that funny billy-goat playing a pipe," laughed Masha.

"And with that long beard it looks just like Old Afanasy!" Akulina rocked with laughter.

Then for the first time Egor smiled again. He did not tell anyone how tired he felt, as if he had been wrestling with someone all day and finally won. He lay down on the bench and fell into a deep sleep. Why he was smiling no one could say.



All that bitter winter Egor made toys from dawn till dusk. He got through two barrels of clay, and fought his misfortune by hard work.

There was nowhere to sit down in the house. All the benches, shelves and stove-bed, even the larder, were filled with hundreds of toys. Masha and her daughters learnt to paint them. At first they were afraid of spoiling their father's work, but then they got the knack and painted away merrily.

They used a goose quill, not a brush, because it does not stick to damp clay. And they used only three colours: bright red, sunflower yellow and emerald green like young grass after the rain, and when they had finished the toys were a sight for sore eyes!

In the evenings, when the cold moon turned the snow an icy blue and a bitter frost froze the river to the very bed, they lit a resinous splinter torch. Its faint warm light lit up this cosy world of people, clay figures and smiling



beasts living happily together.

Egor's hands never made a fierce monster or a bad person, only good ones. Throughout the whole of Russia, however hard life was for the people, the craftsmen always built, wrote, carved and sculpted things that were good and joyful. Folk laughed at evil and at death itself, for laughter has been man's protection against all misfortune since time immemorial.

Work made the long winter pass quickly. Before they knew where they were, Grandma Akulina was summoning spring with a song.



Fly to us, oh, little larks!
Bring us a fine summer!
We are tired of winter now.
She has eaten all our food!
Our stomachs they are empty,
We have no wood for the fire,
Only care aplenty!

Spring heard and came. The first pussy-willow greeted her with its fluffy branches, a brave tree that does not fear the night frost. Countryfolk broke off willow branches and tapped one another and their cattle on the back with them, chanting: "Pretty willow, beat you hard and bring you health!" And health and strength flowed from the spring willow into them.

Soon after the spring sowing it was St George's Day. The cattle had to be driven from the dark cowsheds to pasture. Grandmother baked some buns again for the cow and Star who brought Egor back from captivity. In the morning she chanted some words over them, and they all set off together with the cattle for the fields, even taking Vanya with them.

Egor was alone. There was only enough clay in the bar-

rels left for one small lark. Suddenly the door in the lobby slammed and someone strode swiftly into the room.

"Who's that?" Egor asked. "Is it you, Masha?"

"No, it's not Masha," the visitor replied in a clear, strong voice that was not familiar. "Why are you sitting at home, when you should be in the fields?"

Egor turned pale.

"I am past that now, friend. There is nothing more for me to do in the fields."

"Yes, there is," said the stranger. "There is something today. Follow me."



"I would gladly, but I cannot," said Egor in a hollow voice. "Do you not see that I am blind? I would not get there."

"I will lead you," said the visitor masterfully. Taking Egor by the hand, he led him silently over the threshold, then through the gate and out of the village into a large meadow.

"Here we are," said the stranger. He bent down to the grass, scooped up two handfuls of pearly dew and splashed it over Egor's face!

The cold dew seemed to burn Egor like fire and he clutched his head with his hands.

"Do not be afraid," the stranger said, quietly. "Take away your hands. Can you see now?" Egor took his hands away cautiously, and lightning seemed to flash before him.

"I can see," he whispered. "I can see!" He laughed and wept, trembling with excitement. In front of him stood a golden-haired youth in shining armour, leaning on a glittering sword.

"St George the Warrior! Am I dreaming or is this a miracle?" Egor stepped back. "Why have you given me back my sight?"

"Because you did not lose heart. Every man passes through darkness and blindness at some time in his life, but not all see the light again. You overcame yourself, so I have restored your sight. Farewell!"

He blazed up in a mass of gold sparks, brighter and brighter, and then melted away. Only a white cloud floated over the meadow and vanished...

What had it been? A miracle, a beautiful dream, or had grandmother's herbs cured Egor? No one can say to this day.



Day followed day like the driving rain, week followed week like the springing grass, and year followed year like the flowing river.

Many years had passed since the wondrous day when Egor regained his sight. Now Vanya, too, had left the parental nest. Like his grandfather before him, he had grown to love bells and was now casting them in Moscow, such melodious bells that their fame had spread as far as Homestead itself. And their daughters had married fine lads, Egor's pupils.

For Egor had heeded Nikodim's bidding and not hidden his talent, but passed it on generously to his pupils. And he had so many of them that there were enough for three teams.

Bright-eyed lads with enquiring minds came from faraway villages to learn from him. Some stayed, but others left, realising that this was not for them. Egor never tried to dissuade them. He did not want to have another Miron. There are many trades in this world. Let them choose the right one, before it was too late, one that would bring pleasure to themselves and joy to others, as Nikodim used to say.

As was the custom, all his pupils lived in his house as one family, sharing everything–work, festivals and grief. Together they learnt everything, acquiring skill, experience of life and generosity of heart. For an evil heart can make art evil too.

Often, instead of instruction, Egor would take his noisy brood to "listen to nature".

In winter they would marvel at the blue shadows on the glittering snow and the snow-covered branches like cherry blossom.

In spring they would watch the steam rising from the warming earth and larks swooping over the first dark pools of melted ice, and listen to rooks cawing on the black trees etched against the bright blue sky.

In summer they admired the delicate blue lakes of blossoming flax, and waited barefoot in the cold dewy grass for the Dawn Maiden to cast her pink veil across the heavens. With rapture and dread, like sparrows under the eaves, they watched from a hay-loft as the dark sky was riven by peals of thunder, and streaked by flashes of blue lightning. And after the downpour, they ran into the yard and stood in the deep grey puddles while a rainbow sparkling with golden sunbeams rose out of the river to span the sky.

In autumn, when the weary earth donned its most colourful attire, and the dew on the long cobwebs shone like precious pearls on a maiden's head-dress, the awe-stricken boys realised there was nothing more beautiful than their native land...

These years brought many things–hunger, pestilence, fires and war. Many dear ones were now lying in their graves. Egor's hair was flecked with silver, and he too had his share of misfortune. Just as wheat that is ground in the mill becomes pure flour, so a man matures in grief.

In hard times he always remembered his grandmother's favourite song:

Behind the dark cloud are twinkling stars,
Behind the stars a bright moon shines,
Behind the moon is a rosy dawn,
And behind the dawn a golden sun.

So his colours did not turn to blacks and greys. Quite the opposite! The longer he lived the brighter and more joyous they became. And, of course, the moment arrived when he decided to paint what he had been dreaming of all his life.

To paint St George, who never ceases to fight evil and, no matter how great it may be, always vanquishes it.

This is how he painted St George on a large panel.

The fearless knight in golden armour is speeding on a fleet-footed steed. His red cloak is flying in the wind and his gold shield blazing in the sun, while his horse tramples down a black dragon pierced by a slender spear.

The whole of Russia is in this splendid, golden-headed youth.

It is Russia, in the crimson fluttering cloak, who is racing fearlessly on the white horse of time, smiting down evil in every shape and form.

All the knowledge and skill that Egor had so painstakingly acquired throughout his life shone out in his St George with youthful power and strength.

"Well, that's it," he whispered wearily into his grey beard. "I haven't disgraced myself, have I?"

He washed his brushes carefully, went out of the house and wandered slowly over the fallen leaves in the forest. Suddenly, high up in the blue sky beyond the white clouds there was a sound like a babbling brook, like that time outside Moscow. Nearer and nearer the strange



music came, until the singers themselves, snow-white swans, appeared out of the blue. Slowly, as if in a dream, they waved their huge wings over him in a kind of summons.

"Whither are you calling me, friends?"

And then he felt getting lighter until he floated gently off the earth and soared silently upwards, higher and higher, flying like a white swan, smoothly flapping his invisible wings, flying in the endless procession of great and nameless Russian masters, like himself, to immortality...



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